

## Chapter 1- The Things that Change

"Harry?"

14-year-old Harry James Potter looked up to see his fraternal twin sister, Amanda Jane Potter looking at him, her emerald green eyes wide with concern as she peered intently into his eyes.

Harry gave her a reassuring smile and shook his head, tucking a strand of her silky, raven-black hair behind her ear. Harry had to marvel at his twin sister's remarkable resemblance to him. Her silky hair, now long enough to fall below her shoulders framed her delicate face beautifully. Several strands occasionally fell into her sparkling emerald green eyes.

Her pale skin looked like porcelain in the darkness of their bedroom like him, her lips were as red as the reddest rose. She was such a beautiful sight to look at and Harry couldn't have been prouder of having such a beautiful girl as his twin sister. It was no wonder that the Slytherin girl made all the boys at their school turn their heads when she walked in the room.

Hell, it was no wonder that Harry himself made the entire female population in Hogwarts swoon every time he passed them.

Harry Potter, the sexy, notorious Slytherin, was known as one of the hottest guys in the entire school of Hogwarts Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He could have gotten any girl he wanted, being the seductive, dark angel he was known to be. His emerald green eyes were always enchanting, always intense and penetrating that when they looked at a person, that person's knees would end up buckling under the gaze.

His raven hair, which back then had used to be unruly and wild, was now elegantly tamed and styled to perfection unless he chose to occasionally style it into wild, intentional spikes on his head, giving him that much lusted after bad boy look which seemed to turn girls into pudding.

His lean, slightly muscular physique made girls' eyes eye him up and down as he walked through the halls and his dark, sinister and bad-boy reputation just added much more to his allure.

It seems the Potter twins were recognized not only for their scars after all. Both being in Slytherin, they had developed an air of aristocracy and elegance about them. If anything, being in Slytherin had helped them develop new ways to express seduction, perfection and confidence which was always recognizable within a Slytherin student.

Over the years, they grew to be popular around the entire school not because of their history of defeating the dark lord but also for their remarkable beauty and strange endearing charisma.

Why wouldn't they be? They were the twins-who-lived through Voldemort's reign of terror... That alone had earned them much more respect from the Wizarding world than they ever would have realized.

Despite their rather nasty behavior towards other people however, the twins were very affectionate towards each other. Probably because they've had to rely on each other since birth and being fraternal twins, they shared a special bond that they shared with no one else.

However, in school, Harry was just simply known as a cold-hearted bastard... There was no other word for it... Someone who did not care about anyone's feelings... Someone who simply did not give a damn about the world around him... A true Slytherin...

Sure, he saved a lot of lives and he knew his role as the ever-so-loved hero in the wizarding world but being a hero and saving lives does not necessarily mean being a noble, what he liked to call, softie, to him.

He seemed to take pride in his appearance as well; very much aware of the benefits he could use with his stunning good looks... Because frankly, he went through girls faster than he went through hairstyles.

At such a young age, he had slept with a fair number of girls in their third and second year and had gone through a lot of girlfriends at that point.

However, despite his complete disregard for women, he loved his sister much more than he loved himself. She was the only girl he had ever cared and looked after. Nothing would ever change that. It was a side to Harry Potter that he only showed to his sister alone.

*It's amazing how everything's changed since we came to Hogwarts...* He thought, a wry smirk forming onto his lips. Harry thought of how the two of them had gone through their previous years.

From first year, they had been sorted into Slytherin and they had met their best, most loyal friends in that house.

Harry's best friend, *Draco Malfoy*, was the other popular Slytherin boy in their group and was as equally notorious and admired as Harry was himself, the two of them spending so much time together.

He and Harry had more than half the females in school lusting after them and at the same time had all the males fearing their wrath.

They were known as the popular *Slytherin duo*, Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy... No one dared to cross their wrath or defy them... No one dared to go against them because with the combination of both boys' magical and physical abilities, no one actually stood a chance.

Green-eyed Potter and silver-eyed Malfoy, true Slytherins at heart, always roaming the school with those trademark sneers on their faces as they sought trouble after trouble, professors and students eyeing them warily whenever they passed by...

Draco Malfoy was no definitely pushover, that was for sure. He was as powerful and as cold or ruthless as Harry was... And in some aspects, Harry refused to admit, Draco could be much colder than he ever was...

With the same dark and mysterious aura around the handsome, silver-blond and the same intense, penetrating eyes, Harry and

Draco were the kind of duo that made the younger years squirm when in their presence...*Feared and Admired at the same time.*

*Draco sure gets his own action...* Harry thought, chuckling to himself as he thought of the girls that had all been trying to get into Draco's pants their previous year.

It was plain and simple really... If the girls in school weren't lusting after Harry, they were lusting after Draco.

Sleek, silver blonde hair which shined in the moonlight, beautiful, dazzling silver eyes, a lean, toned physique, and sexy, predatory confidence, Draco was easily any girl's fantasy come true.

Though he was not as fast and as consistent as his best friend when it came to bedding girls, he certainly did get his fair share over the years.

The thing about Draco was that he only spoke a decent, civil conversation to three people alone.

Three people, the first being Harry, who was the only one Draco actually respected and seemed to recognize as more powerful him, Harry being the leader in their Slytherin group after all.

The second one was AJ whom Harry had discovered that Draco seemed to fancy ever since he had developed strong feelings toward her in their first year. It was quite obvious that Draco was crazy about his sister but he never admitted his feelings for her before.

It was strange that after being so confident with so many girls that Draco couldn't seem to muster up the courage after all these years to admit his feelings for AJ... He never had the same courage when it came to the raven-haired girl...

The third one of course, was Blaise Zabini, another Slytherin boy who was in turn, AJ's best friend.

Aside from those three and Prof. Snape, Draco insulted and tormented just about everyone he met up with, being the Malfoy that he was.

Draco especially hated the Gryffindors, which was why he was always known as an insufferable, obnoxious, spoiled git to them from the very start.

Harry didn't know why but his best friend had always been picky about the people he interacted with, refusing to even talk to people whom he believed were inferior compared to him...

Maybe it was because he was a Malfoy and his father was Lucius Malfoy, former death-eater and rich aristocrat.

Draco and his entire family had always turned his nose up at muggle-born wizards or people who were not "up-to-his-standards", as he would occasionally say.

Instead of reprimanding him about it as everyone would expect, Harry found this particularly amusing. It was definitely no wonder why he and Harry were best friends.

They were on the same wavelength... Two halves of the same stone... Birds of the same feather... It was quiet obvious that despite the animosity between them, they directed a level of respect towards each other that they gave no one else... Sort of like a brotherly fondness...

Harry and Draco were always seen together with their two cronies, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, who were always acting as their bodyguards or plainly just their stupid followers.

Their gang of Slytherins was always the cause of intimidation among other students. Harry would always be recognized as the leader and Draco gladly affirmed to that, proud of being the great and powerful Harry Potter's best friend.

Sometimes Harry and Draco would be seen on either side of AJ and the Slytherin trio would strut around the school as if they owned the place, no doubt something planned that would cause trouble.

AJ, in comparison, hung around with Blaise and sometimes, when she felt like it, another Slytherin, Pansy Parkinson, her friend after Blaise.

Blaise was also a very rich, pure-blooded wizard who liked to believe that every girl would want to get into his pants. Of course he was also good-looking, having gray eyes and raven hair, which were always spiked on his head with blonde highlights.

While Harry and Draco were known as silent antagonists- cold, dark and mysterious and feared by others, Blaise was known as loud, rude and obnoxious who loved to badmouth everyone that got on his nerves. He especially liked to pick on the Hufflepuffs.

Throw aside the horrible nasty, cold attitude to the other houses and his wild tendency to trip every Hufflepuff that passes his chair, Blaise can be a really cool and considerate friend. He was even a witty, charming and charismatic gentleman but people rarely got to see that side of him very much.

The reason he was her best friend was because. Well.. He could understand her. Though not as much as Harry but Blaise was able to understand AJ in a special way that only best friends did.

He may be a jerk in public but once other people did not see them, he could be very sweet and caring. He only acted horribly that way in front of other people but to AJ, he was almost like another brother to her. She could tell him all her problems and he would just listen.. Give advice and comfort her. It was the Blaise Zabini that no one else knew about.

Slytherins have always never showed their sensitive side to anyone else without their consent... They thought of it was a weakness to be ashamed of... They never wanted anyone to realize that underneath that horrible personality, there was a human clamoring to be set loose.

*Well, maybe except for Parkinson...* Harry thought, sneering to himself as he thought of his former girlfriend.

Pansy Parkinson had a horrible reputation of being the Slytherin slut. Harry had already used her body countless times before and she just keeps believing that he loves her though Harry completely blows her off rudely afterwards.

Draco had even taunted her once as "*Harry's Bitch*" which Harry had just smirked to and had ignored altogether while Pansy chose to regard the comment as a compliment.

Girls in Slytherin are way too easy most of the time anyway...Harry thought snobbishly, wrinkling his nose as he thought of the girls in his house in slight disdain. After a while, he tended to get bored with them... They gave in way to quickly...

Well, all except AJ of course, which Harry was definitely grateful for... However, AJ never really did blend in much with the other Slytherin girls... Almost as if she didn't even belong in Slytherin at all...

She refused to taunt the other houses if she could help it and most of the time, she was the one who tried to restrain her housemates from doing anything drastic to anyone else...

Most shocking of all was probably the fact that unlike her friends, AJ Potter was still a proud virgin- pure, innocent and has never been tainted...

Her morals much were higher as she had even admitted to Harry once that she strongly believed in saving herself for the one she really loved. She hadn't even gotten into any sort of relationship yet, which Harry had made sure to.

Even though he was a playboy and went in and out of relationships, he was extremely strict with his younger twin, though only by a measly five minutes, and makes sure no guy got too close to her without waking up in the hospital wing.

It annoyed AJ that her brother disrespected girls in relationships yet he did not allow his sister to date anyone believing she might get hurt in the process. Harry was the reason that instead of attracting guys, they were terrified of asking AJ out or making any sort of moves on her because of their fear of Harry beating them up.

AJ only had one crush however. Ever since first year and that was redheaded Gryffindor, *Ronald Weasley*.

Ron had grown into a looker himself over the years. Now being the Gryffindor seeker ever since second year, he had grown quite athletic.

He was slightly lean from the Quidditch training but unlike the other boys, he was as tall as hell. He was even taller than both Harry and Draco though only by an inch or so. His red hair was shiny and wavy and his blue eyes were always sparkling with mischief, always making AJ's emerald eyes glaze over.

His trademark grin made her swoon at the sight and his easygoing personality made her love him even more. She had always had a thing for him, ever since their first year but she had told no one except Blaise, who liked to tease her constantly.

AJ never really found out why she liked him so much. He wasn't really what she would call, a "knock-out" like Harry or Draco, though his looks did earn him occasional admiring glances every now and then.

He was always tall and lanky and his muscles were not as firm as that of the other boys she knew. He was not even that smart since she knew he flunks a number of classes several times.

Maybe the thing she loved about him was his...His bravery... His courage... Being a Gryffindor probably.. She didn't know why but those Gryffindor qualities attracted her very much...

After all, Ron had surprisingly helped Harry in their second year in the chamber of secrets when his sister, young Ginny Weasley had gotten kidnapped.

The sad part was, the only time Ron had ever looked back at AJ was when he was glaring at her with utmost loathing and hatred which she obliged to return along with a sneer similar to that of her twin's.

That was the reason AJ had always been jealous of Hermione Granger. In her own opinion, she saw that Ron might have a thing for her and that was also the reason why AJ had always tormented Granger whenever she had the chance to.



Hermione Anne Granger was the smartest witch in their whole year, which really pissed AJ off because she had been the second smartest in the year ever since she started Hogwarts. Hermione had always found a way to be higher than her at academics.

The most frustrating part was, she was only higher by a couple of points, around 3 or 2 which meant that they were more or less the same level but Granger was just always higher in numerical standings and beat her in every subject there was...

Because of this, Granger had always been AJ's number one rival and her archenemy and taunting her in the halls was one of the things she enjoyed and prided herself in doing.

Ron, however, was not the safest person to have a crush on, him being Harry's archenemy and all.

Harry had exchanged Ron's friendship for Draco's in their first year when he had accepted Draco's hand of friendship on the Hogwarts express and Ron had never forgiven him for that. Not that Harry cared since he and Ron liked to pick fights with each other occasionally.

Ron and his best friend, Seamus Finnegan, would be the Gryffindor alternative of Harry and Draco and would do anything in their will to foil any scheme of the Slytherins. Ron and Seamus were not as proficient and charming with the ladies as

Harry and Draco were but they were as tough and as daring as the two any day.

Their main advantage to the duo was their Gryffindor bravery, which Harry and Draco will obviously never possess... It was that particular trait which earned the two Gryffindors respect from the other students as well...

In fact, the two rivaling pairs, Potter- Malfoy and Weasley-Finnegan was one of the main reasons why the ever so popular rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin was so strong in their previous years.

They were even hateful towards each other in Quidditch, Harry and Ron being seekers and Draco and Seamus being the team's keepers.

Ron wanted to outdo Harry in everything possible, even girls but unfortunately, that was a category he would never be able to outdo Harry, or Draco for that matter.

Harry shook his head firmly to clear away all his thoughts.

He couldn't let himself be distracted by anything... More so by those pathetic Gryffindors... He had to focus on what was to happen this year. So many changes had taken place his past three years at Hogwarts.

The Sorcerer's stone... Opening the chamber of secrets and finding out that He was a parselmouth, person who could communicate using Parseltongue or Snake language, after a duel with Weasley...

AJ and Draco had been impressed, awed and jealous all at the same time while the others had begun fearing him as the heir of Slytherin.

He snorted derisively.

*I may be a bastard but I am no heir of Slytherin.* He thought in amusement though the thought seemed to summon a heavy feeling of darkness within him as he shivered the feeling away, shaking his head.

Then had come finding out that an escaped convict was after him and his twin sister only to find out that he was innocent and was their godfather who was framed by another friend of his father's for his parents' death.

*Peter Pettigrew.* Harry thought in disgust, his handsome features forming itself into a horrifying scowl.

Becoming the most advanced student in DADA and becoming friends with Prof. Remus Lupin; one of the marauders, a group of friends his father, James Potter, was involved in.

Learning the "Expecto Patronum" charm from Prof. Lupin after developing a fear for dementors; keepers of Azkaban... Winning the Quidditch cup for the Slytherins just before their captain, Marcus Flint graduated from Hogwarts... He and AJ using the time turner AJ had used to attend all her extra subjects to go back into time and save his Godfather from the dementor's kiss last year...

*Damn... What fucked-up situations I seem to be getting myself into all the time...* Harry thought, exhausted from his own thoughts.

He and AJ had been lying awake the whole night looking at the ceiling in silence in the room they shared upstairs in the Dursley's house, the room surprisingly large and beautifully decorated.

Because of their new, Slytherin-style way of handling things, they were no longer intimidated by the Dursleys and therefore, refused to be abused by them anymore.

They had come back from their first year powerful and cold that their Uncle Vernon had been terrified of them and had given them a new room upstairs.

Now they were no longer ordered around but instead, feared by their relatives and were allowed anything they wanted, as long as they didn't meddle with the Dursley's lives.

They were allowed to eat anything they wanted, though he and twin sister were not heavy eaters like their whale of a cousin, Dudley was.

They were bought new expensive clothing, which took away their "poor orphan", image and helped them look like the popular wizard and witch they were recognized as in the Wizarding world.

Hell, they were now even allowed to study or do their homework if they wanted to as long as they didn't let the neighbors see what they were doing.

Hedwig and Ferio, their owls, were now freely flying in and out as often as they pleased, much to the dismay of their Uncle about the neighbors seeing owls flying into their house constantly.

*Life is good when you are feared.* Harry thought, chuckling.

Especially now that they had a Godfather whom everyone still believed as an ex-convict- Sirius Black.

Sirius liked to check up on them every now and then to see if they were doing alright and asked them to report anything they didn't like to him and he would be sure to take care of it.

Harry sniggered again, licking his lips in amusement at his own thoughts.

Damn, he felt good.

He and AJ would even be getting to spend the rest of their summer with Draco at his house since his father was staying at Bulgaria for some gathering for the rest of the summer and his mother would be taking them to see the Quidditch world cup.

Draco had deliberately gotten two extra tickets for them so they could watch together and knowing Draco, Harry was sure they were excellent seats.

He wouldn't miss it for the world. In fact, Draco was coming to pick them up tomorrow and Harry couldn't contain his excitement any longer.

"Alright Harry, what's up? You haven't been listening to me at all for the last hour, is there something on your mind?" AJ snapped in annoyance.

The two had cuddled up together in Harry's bed and had thrown the blanket over themselves, whispering to each other just like they always liked to do at nighttimes.

Harry smirked. "Sorry sis. I've just been reflecting a little, you know how much of a deep thinker I am." He replied.

AJ rolled her eyes, giving him an exasperated look as she sat up in bed with a scowl on her face.

"Yeah you do like to drown your tiny brain to much in your own thoughts and you somehow end up confusing yourself every time." She retorted sarcastically.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Sod off... At least I don't go yapping on about some lame Ravenclaw who sounds like such a dork to me." He returned irritably.

AJ looked indignant as she gave him a glare, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Terry Boot is not a dork! He happens to be one of the smartest guys in our year and I've heard that he's a great guy." She pointed out.

"Smart and dork are the same." Harry said flippantly, yawning as he rolled over and snuggled into his pillow. "So you're saying I'm a dork?!" AJ asked angrily.

Harry snorted but didn't answer, shutting his eyes sleepily until AJ whacked him painfully on the head, growling. "Ow! Crazy bitch! What was that for?!" He asked, grimacing.

AJ gave him a wry smile. "Nothing... It was simply for being well...you, Harry." She responded flatly, a sarcastic smile on her face.

Harry couldn't hide a grin, recalling their childhood insults at each other five years ago.

"You're an impossible prick, you know that?" He said, laughing fondly as he put a strong arm around his sister. "Come here, you little brat!" He teased affectionately as he began ruffling her hair in an affectionate manner, laughing as the girl thrashed around wildly in protest.

"Hey! Quit it jerk-face!" AJ laughed and fended him off. Harry began tickling her mercilessly earning hysterical giggles from his twin as they rolled around in his bed, laughing.

When he stopped, AJ was breathing heavily but she was snuggling in her brother's affectionate embrace, smiling contentedly. "Harry?" She asked. Harry looked down at her, both sets of emerald eyes meeting

each other with the same amount of warmth in the orbs reflecting each other.

"I'm glad you're my brother. I don't know what I'd do without you." She said, giving him a warm smile. Harry felt his heart melt at his sister's affection and smiled back at her. "I'll always be here for you sis.. What are big brothers for?" He said softly, kissing his sister's scar.

AJ smiled and pulled the blanket over them, taking a deep breath of air before snuggling into her twin, shutting her eyes sleepily. "I love you jerk-face. Good night." She said, yawning as she pulled the blankets tighter over herself, sighing in contentment.

Harry grinned at her sleeping form before he promptly reached over and flicked off the soft, dim glow of the lamp on the bedside table, yawning to himself.

"I love you too.." He responded sleepily, stroking her hair as he snuggled closer to his twin, hugging her as they both fell into a dreamless sleep, awaiting the warm, morning rays of the day that awaits them.

*TBC...*

**A/N:** Well? What do you guys think? **Please review!!** bites nails and paces around nervously That was only an introduction chapter so you guys could all familiarize yourselves with this whole new universe. I didn't want to start on the story with you guys all confused and everything so I hope things are cleared up here... As you all noticed, the characters are all introduced in the story and were given descriptions on how they are in this alternate universe. Hope everything is cleared up. Well, **PLEASE REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 2- Malfoy Manor

"AJ! Have you seen my aftershave?!" Harry's voice echoed from the twins' room as AJ was eating breakfast with the Dursleys downstairs.

AJ sighed, the spoonful of cereal stopping halfway from meeting her mouth as she rolled her eyes at her brother's irritated voice. Uncle Vernon was eating stiffly with slight tension towards AJ while Aunt Petunia had pressed her thin lips into a tight line, not daring to say anything. Dudley was pigging out as usual but casting suspicious and cautious looks towards AJ every now and then which AJ could only return with an irritated scowl, shaking her head at him.

Sighing again, AJ set down the spoon and got up from the table, wiping her mouth gingerly in the process. "Excuse me Uncle Vernon." She said abruptly as she headed for their room, not bothering to wait for her uncle's answer.

Her twin brother had finished breakfast first and had taken the liberty of hogging the shower in their room as usual and it always amazed AJ that he could sometimes take as long as she did in the bathroom just to make sure he looked good.

*What do I expect from Harry snogalicious Potter?* AJ thought irritably as she walked up the stairs. The annoying thing was, Harry only charmed a girl confidently until he got what he wanted for. After that, he would go back to being the cold, heartless bastard he was. He was so self-centered sometimes, knowing that every girl he asked would strip for him if he asked for it, that he didn't seem to care about anyone he hurts in the process.

"What is it now?" AJ asked as she entered the room, seeing her brother rummaging around his closet, dressed in only a green towel wrapped around his waist, dripping water all over the bedroom floor. The sight didn't really shock her, however as Harry didn't even bother turning at her voice, not minding the fact of being half-naked in front of his twin sister.

She and Harry had always never cared about seeing each other naked. The twins would even take baths together if they wanted to since they were so comfortable around each other.

However... If it hadn't been her, a girl would have squeaked at the mere sight of it... Harry Potter, hottest guy in school, all dripping and wet with only a towel to cover his lower half. His bare, lean, muscular chest dripping with droplets of water and his sexy hair damp and glistening with water droplets.

AJ leaned casually against the wall with a smug smile on her face, tempted to take a picture and sell it around school but she smirked and inwardly decided not to.

"What the bloody hell are you still looking at? Help me find my aftershave!" Harry barked. AJ scowled indignantly to herself, crossing her arms over her chest in anger. Being the older sibling always made him believe that he had the authority to order his little sister around. And he always did seem to do so...

"Did you check behind the bathroom mirror?" She asked sarcastically as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, walking into the bathroom. Harry looked annoyed, raking a hand through his raven hair to show his obvious frustration.

"Of course I did. What do you bloody think I am, Stupid?! I'll have you know-" He stopped when his twin walked out carrying the bottle of the musky-scented aftershave he used.

"Oh. I knew that." He snapped stupidly, snatching it from her in irritation and humiliation. AJ sniggered, as Harry looked foolish, muttering under his breath in response to AJ's knowing smirk.

"Thanks." He mumbled under his breath, heading back inside and starting to shave quietly. "I swear Harry, what would you do without me?" AJ asked as she leaned against the bathroom door, sighing exaggeratedly.

Harry had to smile as he caught her eyes sparkling with humor through her reflection in the mirror, making him roll his eyes in response. "Yeah, yeah.. I'd be lost without you. Whatever... Now go and take that bloody shower because damn, you stink!" Harry quipped, causing AJ to scowl and shove him slightly, making his towel fall off.



"Thanks a lot." Harry said carelessly, turning back to shaving himself and not bothering to cover himself up as AJ smirked and headed towards the shower. "You could at least make yourself look decent. What a horrifying sight to haunt me at night..." She teased, peeling off her muggle tank top and shorts and climbing into the shower stall.

"Hey sod off. Why would I want to? I have nothing to be ashamed of. If you got it, flaunt it, right?" Harry pointed out smugly, washing his face. "I swear, you are such an egoistic pig." AJ said in disbelief, shaking her head. Harry only chuckled softly—A sound of sensuality he liked to emit that would have made any girl's knees buckle under her which, unfortunately, only had the effect of annoying his twin sister in contrast.

"Stupid idiot..." She muttered to herself, rolling her eyes at him. "I heard that. Just finish your shower. Draco will pick us up by noon so you better hurry up." He said as he picked up his towel and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

AJ rolled her eyes again and finally turned on the water, sighing in contentment as the warm drops rinsed her clean. With a small smile, she slowly began soaping herself, relaxing and enjoying the comforting silence of the room as she bathed. Humming softly, she began massaging some shampoo into her hair just as the bathroom mirror began to fog up from the temperature of the water, creating an enticing moisture in the room.

Thirty minutes later, she had finally changed and slipped on a pale green summer dress which showed off a lot of her pale skin, the dress short enough to show a large amount of her long legs but not enough to be scandalous. Gazing at herself in the mirror, AJ began tying a matching ribbon through her hair, admiring her appearance with a bright smile on her face.

"Good morning sunshine." She whistled to herself, grinning but hearing the amused snort behind her, her smile creased into a snarl, rolling her eyes at being caught in a situation. Harry had walked in just then, scowling when he saw his twin's appearance, leaning against the wall, eyebrow raised as he wrinkled his nose in disapproval at her.

"Couldn't you have worn something less revealing?" He growled, shaking his head as he noticed the skirt's length. AJ laughed, looking amused at her brother's protective nature.

"I thought you liked it when girls wore short clothing." She teased, raising an eyebrow at him in question. Harry grimaced delicately, rolling his eyes in response. "Yeah I do but not if they're my sister. I don't want men drooling over my twin. You could at least wear something to cover your legs." He ordered.

AJ scowled. "No way. This is a very beautiful dress and I refuse for you to choose my own clothes for me." She said stubbornly. Harry sighed, checking his watch hastily before turning a reluctant face towards his twin sister. "Fine. Just hurry up and finish fixing yourself. I'll be waiting downstairs." He said, turning to leave.

As he turned to go, AJ noticed his outfit and could help but to admire her brother's great sense of dressing. He wore a classy, dark blue silk turtleneck shirt; thin, silver-wired glasses that gave him that sophisticated, older image, black, designer slacks and stylish black shoes.

His hair had been gelled back today and he had practically bathed in his sexy scented cologne. He was one gorgeous guy. AJ smiled proudly to herself as she finished styling her hair, grabbing the object resting on the table near the mirror soon after.

She clasped on her favorite necklace that Harry had given her last year, a silver chain with a matching charm shaped like her scar. She put on the matching earrings and slipped into black, comfortable sandals before she sprayed a whiff of her perfume and grabbed her bag, took one last look at the mirror before walking out of the room.

Harry was already waiting outside on the couch, humming to himself as he checked his wristwatch every now and then, obviously eager to get out of where he was. The Dursleys were also in the living room, all three of them looking extremely nervous and tense as they hastily tried to carry on with their normal activities with Harry there.

*I guess they haven't forgotten what happened before.* AJ thought in amusement as the memory invaded her thoughts once again. Before

their second year, Blaise had come to pick them up and had his older brother had ended up hexing Dudley into having a longer tongue.

Harry couldn't stop laughing for weeks and the mere memory of that incident still brought tears of mirth to the young Slytherin's eyes. AJ smiled grimly, shaking their head in both fear and anticipation.

Now they were really in for it... If they thought Blaise was bad, what would they think about Draco? The Malfoys were known for being nasty and treacherous in the Wizarding world.... But then again, so were the Potters...

Harry grinned when he saw AJ and patted the seat next to him, which she gladly took, both of them fidgeting impatiently as they waited for Draco's arrival. "How are your freaky friends getting here this time, boy?" Uncle Vernon asked gruffly, peering at them above his newspaper.

Harry barely looked at his Uncle; keep his voice calm and cold as he answered, his eyes dark and hateful. "They'll get here, Uncle." He answered coldly, not offering any additional information. Uncle Vernon snorted in disbelief but didn't ask any more questions for the remainder of the hour.

Dudley, who was chomping on a chocolate bar nervously, looked at Harry as though he was going to blow him up any minute, moving away from the twins as far as he could manage. Several more moments passed until AJ yawned and rested her head on her twin's shoulder, closing her eyes sleepily.

Harry yawned himself and was about to shut his eyes when they heard a loud crash in the boarded up fireplace that caused all five of them to jump up in surprise.

"Good heavens! What on earth was that noise?" Aunt Petunia squeaked nervously, hiding behind Uncle Vernon.

"Mummy!" Dudley whined, beginning to cry in fear as he cowered behind his mother and began peering over at the offending fireplace. Harry grinned knowingly and sauntered over towards the fireplace, an eyebrow raised in question.

"Yow! I told you we shouldn't have taken floo powder, young master! This is a muggle fireplace!" A voice squeaked. "Rubbish, Poppet! Harry and AJ know I'm coming so they must have told those filthy muggles bout this! Now how do we get out of here?! It's so damn fucking cramped and dirty!" They heard Draco's voice say, as though he was squished up against something.

"Maybe they can hear us, master Draco." The higher voice said hopefully, obviously a house-elf. "Hey, for once short-stuff, you may be right! Hey, Harry!! AJ!! Can you here us in here?!" Draco's voice hollered as he pounded on the boards.

The twins began laughing in amusement as their relatives backed away in fear, eyes wide and suspicious. "What the hell is going on here?" Uncle Vernon bellowed, turning his demanding eyes to Harry, who only smirked at him, laughing harder in response.

"They've tried to get here by floo powder but you boarded up the fireplace so they can't get out. It's how we wizards transport ourselves from one location to another." AJ explained, laughing herself.

"Hey! AJ! Let us out!" Draco yelled out impatiently, furiously banging on the boards in irritation. AJ giggled as she and Harry walked over to the fireplace, identical smirks on their faces.

"Hold on Draco." Harry said, still sniggering as he pulled out his wand from his pocket, causing the Dursleys to cower away in fear and nervousness. "Why don't you ask Poppet to blow up the boards?" AJ suggested lightly, shaking her head at Harry in disapproval.

"Yeah, you're right. Hold on." Draco responded through the boards before the twins heard their hushed whispering. The twins backed away suddenly as their Uncle began walking towards them, rage and anger visible on his features.

"Now hold on a minute, just what the hell are you going to—"

***BOOM!***

He screamed as he was thrown back into the wall when the fireplace exploded, the boards covering it splitting apart and flying all over the place. Dudley ran into his mother's arms and cowered away in fear as the three Dursleys watched the smoke clear away to reveal Poppet, the Draco's personal house-elf and Draco himself who was covered in dust and soot, a disgusted scowl on his handsome face.

"Yuck. I'm filthy..." He whined childishly as he dusted himself clean, his face scrunched up in obvious disgust. Harry leaned back against the wall and looked at his best friend in amusement, shaking his head in mirth.

"Don't you laugh at me, Potter. It's not everyday you see a Malfoy heir covered in dust." Draco snapped, dusting himself irritably. Poppet raised his index finger, causing all three Dursleys to scream and cower back. Draco smirked at this as Poppet used his magic to remove the dust from Draco's black, velvet robes. Turning around, he threw Harry a grin, eyebrow raised expectantly.

"You all set to go, Harry?" He asked, throwing a sneer over at Dudley, who squeaked and backed away some more, obviously frightened by the wizard's taunting expression. Harry grinned back, offering a hand which Draco took and the two boys performed their special handshake, much to AJ's annoyance.

"You bet. I'll just grab our stuff in our room and-" He didn't get to finish his sentence as Draco snapped his fingers and Poppet rushed upstairs to fetch Harry and AJ's trunks. "Thanks for picking us up, Draco." AJ said, impressed at the house-elf's obedience and efficiency.

Draco jumped and saw AJ for the first time beside Harry, his silver eyes trailing up her slender frame for a minute before he gave her a gorgeous smile. "Sure, AJ. Don't mention it." He said, his eyes focused intently on the girl's long legs before he turned and flashed Harry a sheepish grin.

Harry sniggered but Draco ignored him as AJ walked forward and gave him a brotherly kiss on the cheek. "Good to see you again." She said, smiling warmly at the boy. Draco smiled back in response, a slight tinge of pink on his pale cheeks.

"You too, Potter. I can't help but admit that I missed your loud annoying comments once in a while." He said, instantly causing AJ to glare at him icily and Harry to smirk, shaking his head.

"Why you stupid jerk, I'll have *you* know that I—" Harry cut her off with a glare, silencing his twin easily while Draco held back a snort of derisive laughter, flashing a mocking smirk at the raven-haired girl in amusement.

Harry rolled his eyes at them, wanting nothing more than to leave the Dursleys house to care that his best friend was hitting on his sister once again. "Cut it out you two. Come on then Draco, I can't wait to get out of here." He said, cracking his knuckles.

Uncle Vernon snapped out of his trance and headed towards the three teenagers, his face turning purple. "You boy!" He yelled at Draco, who seemed less than bored, merely answering by raising an eyebrow haughtily.

"How dare you! You can't just go barging in here, blowing up our fireplace like that! Why, I can have you arrested for house wrecking and expose all of you freaks to the entire world! I will not have this 'magic' in my house!" He ranted, his face getting darker.

Draco grinned at Harry and turned back to the big man, giving him an impish smile in return. "Good day to you too sir. I'm Draco Malfoy, Harry's best friend. Such a pleasure to meet you at last. Harry has told me a lot about his muggle relatives." He said in a mocking tone.

Harry sneered in agreement, his eyes narrowing themselves into cold, dangerous slits of hatred and loathing. "Indeed, Uncle. This is my Draco, the wizard I've been telling you all about." He said darkly, winking tauntingly at Dudley, whose eyes widened in response, gulping loudly.

"Guys...Don't do anything funny... Remember, we're not allowed to do magic—" AJ warned but they ignored her. "So, I thought you were the only bastard in that school but it turns out you've found someone who is just as freaky as you are!" Uncle Vernon said mockingly to Harry, making the boy narrow his eyes in anger.

Draco, however, wasn't listening as he casually nudged AJ, an evil smile on his face as he nodded towards Dudley. "Is that Dudley?" He whispered, his silver eyes glinting maliciously as an evil thought popped into his head. AJ only glared at him in suspicion, her eyes narrowed and her lips set into a worried scowl, fidgeting around uncomfortably.

Draco winked at her and walked over to Dudley, who hid behind his mother but ended up only covering his face since he was ten times larger than Aunt Petunia was. "Hi there Dudley. I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Draco." Draco said cheerfully, extending his hand to the fat boy.

Dudley refused to take it, backing up even more as he let out a whimper of fear in response, causing Draco's smile to falter slightly in disgust and loathing. Draco shrugged, still grinning as he walked away, muttering something AJ didn't quite hear under his breath.

"Damn!" He cursed loudly, stopping where he was as he dropped several candies on the floor, hurrying to pick them all up. He picked them all up and gave Dudley one more smirk before walking back to stand beside Harry, who had watched the exchange in amusement.

Poppet came back just then, carrying the trunks, which he had magically reduced to fit in his palm. "Let's get going then." Draco said as Poppet conjured a fire magically with his hand. Harry's uncle gasped and backed away into the wall again in fear.

AJ rolled her eyes and waited as Draco offered her a pinch of floo powder, an innocent smile on his face. "Just shout out 'Malfoy Manor' and you'll be fine." He said, winking at her as AJ rolled her eyes, taking a pinch of floo powder cautiously.

She shut her eyes tightly before she threw the pinch of powder into the fire, causing it to turn green as she stepped into the fire, making her Aunt gasp in shock. "Malfoy Manor!" She yelled out, disappearing immediately.

"Well, go next Poppet." Draco ordered self-importantly, his eyes narrowed in annoyance at the house-elf. The house-elf nodded and

threw a pinch of powder again, squeaking out "Malfoy Manor!" before disappearing too.

Harry was just about to throw some floo powder into the fire when he heard his Aunt scream. He and Draco turned around to see Aunt Petunia screaming beside what looked like a giant-sized pig in Dudley's clothes. Draco sneered as Harry began laughing hysterically at the sight, his form shaking in mirth.

"That's what you get for not returning other people's candy." Draco said flippantly, smirking as Harry gave him their secret handshake, punching each other's fist lightly at the end.

"Good one, Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed, laughing as he clapped Draco on the back, both of them still laughing. "Why you no good piece of vermin! Get back here!!" Uncle Vernon bellowed like a bull, racing towards them.

Both Draco and Harry's eyes widened this time as the large man headed for them, causing both boys to back away in fear and nervousness. "Uh oh! Hurry, throw twice as much floo powder in there!" Draco yelled in alarm, shoving the bag towards Harry.

Harry tossed the floo powder into the fire before Draco shoved them both inside in panic. "Shout it with me Harry!" Draco said hastily, his eyes wide in horror as Uncle Vernon lunged faster for them, rage obvious on the large man's face.

"Don't you run from me! You come back here and set my son right!" Uncle Vernon screamed, jumping for them. "Malfoy Manor!!" Both boys yelled, disappearing right before Uncle Vernon jumped into the fireplace, missing them by a mere second. Harry felt a jerk in his body as he collapsed onto a cold marble floor, Draco landing right beside him with a loud thump.

"Alright, what in bloody Merlin's name did you do?" AJ asked them sharply, offering a hand first to her brother, then to Draco to help them stand up, eyebrow raised haughtily.

Harry grinned innocently at her while Draco smirked, his silver eyes glinting in mischief. "What makes you think we would do anything



AJ?" Harry asked her innocently, getting up and dusting his clothes out of habit.

"Yeah, we're as sweet as can be." Draco agreed mockingly, lifting the hand AJ had offered to him to his lips and giving it a kiss. AJ immediately yanked it away irritation, making a tutting noise as she flipped her hair over her shoulder and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Exactly. You two are the sweetest Slytherins there are, now what did you do?." She said sarcastically, a demanding tone in her voice. The both shrugged, giving each other a secret wink which caused the girl to narrow her eyed dangerously at the two boys in front of her.

"Wasn't that bad." Draco said as he shrugged nonchalantly, an innocent gleam in his eye. "Yeah, it was nothing. Draco just slipped Dudley a candy that turned him into what he really was." Harry said flippantly, suddenly looking around Malfoy Manor in awe.

AJ raised an eyebrow in horror, her eyes widening in dread at the answer. "Which is?" She demanded weakly, her voice quavering.

"A pig." Draco said derisively making the two boys laugh again and AJ shake her head, her jaw hanging open. "Draco! That's horrible! He was still our cousin, you know! How could you even—"

"Ah, don't worry. The stuff wears off in a few hours. Anyway, come on guys. I'll show you to your rooms. I ordered Poppet to take your trunks to your rooms already. Come on, I'll give you a tour." Draco interrupted her as he led them around the huge, elegant mansion, a smug smile on his face as he saw their awestruck faces.

"This is some house, Draco." AJ marveled as she took in the rich, classy and exquisite surroundings, eyes wide in admiration. "Naturally... Mother is just really picky about interior decorating. Speaking of mother, I'll introduce you to her later. I believe she's in the gardens right now, having her outdoor massage." Draco said, leading them up the huge spiral staircase made out of white marble.

AJ rolled her eyes at the boastful tone of his voice, looking away from the blonde so he couldn't see the irritated look on her face. "That's

some *ego* too..." She muttered under her breath. Harry chuckled under his breath, highly amused at his sister's scorn towards his best friend.

"Hey Draco, wouldn't happen to have any gorgeous sisters or cousins now, would you?" He asked, grinning. "Ow!" He yelped suddenly when his twin smacked him sharply on the head, growling fiercely at him in response. "I was kidding, AJ!" Harry exclaimed, laughing as he rubbed his head.

Draco laughed as well, shaking his head as he watched the two of them silently, his gaze lingering on AJ for a minute before he shrugged and turned away. He led them through a difficult passageway of halls until they reached a classy end of the corridor, pausing when they reached a door.

"Here's your room, AJ. It's actually right across from mine." He added, smirking a little as he saw the shocked look on her face. Harry smirked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion and warning.

"Don't get any ideas, Malfoy. My twin sister is still young so I am not allowing suitors yet." Harry warned under his breath, suddenly making his best friend turn an interesting shade of scarlet. AJ looked between the two of them curiously as they whispered, her eyebrows fused together in question.

"I honestly don't know what you mean, Harry." Draco mumbled back, a scowl on his features as he spoke. Harry shot him an impish grin, knowing but threatening look in his emerald-green eyes. "Oh I think you do, Malfoy...Don't even think about it. She's *off-limits*." He whispered threateningly.

Draco mumbled something incoherent again before he opened the door and let them in, showing AJ the huge, exquisite bedroom. "Whoa.." She thought as she eyed the surroundings in astonishment, a smile lighting up her face.

The room itself was huge and it was clearly designed for a Slytherin since the color scheme of the room was all green and silver. The four-poster bed was covered lavishly in silk sheets and satin curtains were drawn around it while the coziness of the room almost seemed

to call AJ to sleep already. It was dimly lighted and smelled of sweet incense while AJ could see her trunk on the carpeted floor and Ferio's cage on one of the tables.

AJ, despite herself, smiled at Draco, which the blonde easily returned, unknowingly sending a delightful shiver down both their spines. "This is gorgeous!" She exclaimed, collapsing on the bed and snuggling into one of the pillows, breathing in its sweet scent.

Draco grinned at the sight, amused as AJ began jumping up and down childishly on the bed, a wide smile on her face. "Glad you like the room. I had it decorated like mine." He said as a-matter-of-factly, cringing in response when Harry snapped his head and glared at him, narrowing his eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes for a minute before he eyed the next room, a curious look on his face as he entered. "This room mine?" He asked, opening the door and walking inside. The room was similar to that of Draco and AJ's but the only difference was that it was Red and Gold. Harry narrowed his eyes dangerously as Draco walked in after him, AJ soon following right after.

"Yep, that's your room." He said, laughing as the horrified look on Harry's face. "Why the hell did you use Gryffindor colors?" Harry snapped irritably, pulling his wand out of his pocket. Draco gave him his trademark sneer, shrugging and chuckling again as Harry casually flicked his wand over the room, instantly changing the room into having green and silver colors as well.

"Hey... I just thought it might suit you, Potter." He taunted, laughing as he pulled both twins away and walked into his room. "Asshole." Harry mumbled so Draco wouldn't hear, grumbling behind him in irritation.

AJ heard this and laughed quietly to herself, shaking her head at his grumpy attitude. "Hold on a minute... Harry... We're not allowed to use magic outside of school yet aren't we?" AJ suddenly asked, her eyes wide and panicky.

Draco and Harry both smirked at her, shaking their head to calm the girl down. "Relax hotstuff... Malfoy Manor has protection spells all

around it so no Ministry member would ever realize that an underage wizard was casting spells inside.” Draco said casually, gesturing for them to come into his room.

“My mistake *Mister Malfoy*...” AJ retorted sarcastically under her breath, rolling her eyes and grumbling to herself in mild humiliation. Draco and Harry both ignored her, smirking at each other in response.

"I want to show you guys something." Draco said as the twins walked into his room, rummaging around and grabbing something from his large walk in closet. AJ sighed and walked over to his desk, her eyes peering around the room curiously. She blinked and picked up a framed photograph of herself, causing her eyes to widen in shock.

The picture was taken by a wizard's camera in their third year when AJ had just finished showering for Quidditch and was in her Quidditch uniform. She and her best friend Blaise had joined the team as beaters in their second year.

Her photo was smiling and waving, winking and blowing kisses every now and then making the real AJ blush at the picture AJ's attitude. Around the frame, she was surprised to see that Draco had drawn little hearts with her name on it, causing her look at it in confusion.

"What the bloody hell is this, Malfoy?" She demanded, whipping around to glare at where Draco and Harry were engaged in another argument inside the closet. "Hmm? What's what-*DAMN!* Potter, what the hell do you think you're doing snooping around other people's stuff?!" Draco instantly snapped as he flushed bright red and snatched the frame away from AJ, hastily hiding it behind his closet.

AJ shot him an odd, bewildered look while Harry collapsed on the bed, folding his hands behind his head and grinning slyly. "Why do you have picture of me on your desk, Draco?" AJ asked again, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"That's none of your damn business, Potter! Besides, what are you looking at me like that for? You think I actually like you?! Don't get your brain up in the skies, you obviously think too much. It's making me sick!" He snapped, glaring fiercely at her while AJ's jaw dropped in anger.

“Excuse me?! You have *some* nerve, Malfoy, to even *consider* the idea of *me* ever liking a jerk like *you*! You sexist, arrogant pig! I wouldn’t like you if you were the last guy on the planet!” She snapped again, causing Draco to stiffen and clench his hands into fists.

*Here they go...* Harry thought, pinching the bridge of his nose as he held back a groan. Draco’s silver eyes flashed as he stood up and walked over to AJ, meeting her challenging gaze. “Why you—”

“Say Draco, didn’t you say you got us copies of those pictures you took last year?” Harry interrupted, not wanting another Draco-AJ debate to erupt right in front of him. Draco instantly stopped and exchanged a long, cold glare with AJ before turning to look at him in response.

“Yeah.... I got you guys copies of the pictures. Thought you might want one.” Draco said stiffly, giving AJ a cold sneer again which the girl was only glad to return. Draco shook his head and handed each of them two small-sized wizarding photographs, each one moving magically as they eyed the picture in keen interest.

AJ snatched it out of his hand and peered at the two photos curiously, finally smiling as she recognized when they had been taken. They were both taken by Draco’s magical wizard camera since they were both moving animatedly.

One was a photo of their whole Slytherin gang. Harry, Draco, AJ and Blaise were all in Quidditch robes of green and silver, being the only ones in their year who were in the Quidditch team while the rest were in Hogwarts robes.

The boys, namely, Harry, Draco, Blaise, Crabbe and Goyle were at the back in their own made-up pose while the girls were kneeling in front. Harry was at the very center of the boys while Draco leaned on him from his left and Blaise leaned on him from his right.

All three boys had smug, egotistic smirks on their faces as they kept posing in every pose they could possibly think of, bringing a grin to AJ’s face. Crabbe and Goyle, however, were on either sides looking just as clueless as usual as they gave the camera blank, uninterested stares, shrugging occasionally.

As for the girls, AJ was kneeling right in front of her brother, smiling and winking at the photo as Harry would occasionally ruffle his sister's hair once in a while for fun and she would scowl up at him in annoyance.

To her left was Pansy and Lila Perrine, another girl from Slytherin, who were both patting their hair and blowing kisses up at the boys while on AJ's right was Millicent Bulstrode, who was big enough to take up enough space for two.

It was a really cute photograph that Prof. Snape had taken after their Quidditch victory against Gryffindor during their victory party in the Common room last year since they were in front of the Slytherin fireplace.

AJ smiled and turned to look at the other picture, squinting to see it clearly. It was a picture of only three people- Harry, Draco and AJ.

Blaise had taken it in the Quidditch pitch after they had been practicing for Quidditch. One again they were in their Quidditch robes, AJ right in between Harry and Draco, all three of them grinning like they didn't have a care in the world.

Harry and Draco had both an arm around her and she had both her arms around them, laughing as they both leaned in and gave her a kiss on each cheek, Draco on her right and Harry on her left.

Laughing, AJ slipped the photographs into her robe pocket, making a mental note to herself to slip it into her album later. Looking up, she finally gave Draco a smile to show her appreciation and apology, which the boy slowly returned with a lopsided grin of his own.

"Thanks Drac." She said sincerely, nodding rather awkwardly in acknowledgement. Draco couldn't help but smile back. "Sure thing, hotstuff." He said, the name causing AJ's left eye to twitch in restrained annoyance as she merely nodded again, turning away.

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, barely preventing laugh as he thought of how fast their emotions seemed to shift when it came to each other. "Yeah. Thanks Draco. Come on

then, show us the rest of your house. Do you have a swimming pool?" Harry asked.

Draco broke his gaze at AJ and grinned at him, nodding. "Of course, Potter! You guys want to go swimming?" He asked. The three tore off immediately, Draco leading them down to their pool house as AJ glowered to herself behind them.

*Ooh...That Malfoy is such an annoying, egoistic pig...I can't believe some girls would actually consider him as hot and handsome...She thought sulkily, scowling at the said boy's back. But...I guess even I have to admit...He was really sweet when he wanted to be. She added, bushing slightly.*

Then she sighed. *I guess there was only one problem...He isn't Ron.*

**A/N: In case you guys have noticed, I'VE DONE A LOT OF EDITING IN THIS CHAPTER.** This one provides much more background information about Harry and Draco and well... Everything else! Next chapter is all about how Hermione feels towards this new alternate Harry and what's been going on in her life and the rest of our lovable Gryffindors! Oh, and if you're all wondering, yes, I did edit these chapters, hehe... I want to make sure they're all properly checked. Anyway, PLEASE REVIEW!! MWAH! Luvya

### Chapter 3- Bitter Thoughts and Reflections

14-year-old Hermione Granger yawned loudly and rubbed her eyes, sleepily glancing around her stylishly decorated bedroom as she quietly shut the large, hardbound book in front of her from where she sat on her neatly-organized study table.

Sighing, she checked her watch, frowning at the sight that met her as she did. *It's one in the morning...* She thought drearily, getting up and stretching slightly in an attempt to get some blood into her cold muscles.

Smiling to herself, she shook her head and got up from her desk, heading towards her large, pink four-poster bed to get some sleep. Then, frowning, she stood up again and stared at herself in the mirror, inspecting her appearance in slight resentment and dissatisfaction.

Her brown hair was bushy as always and was currently tied into a tight bun on the back of her head with several loose strands falling into her face. She was still sporting two rather large front teeth and it was quite obvious that she was still waiting for the proper body parts to develop.

*Well... This is as good as it's going to get...* She thought, shrugging at her reflection which seemed to give her a smirk in response, causing the Gryffindor to blink in surprise before she shook her head, laughing at herself. *I need sleep... I'm beginning to see things now...* She thought in amusement. Sighing, she took off her bun and collapsed back down on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

*Maybe I better get some rest. Ron is coming to pick me up tomorrow.* Hermione thought, yawning loudly as she stared up at the ceiling in silence. Her best friend Ron had promised to pick her up the following day so that they could watch the Quidditch World Cup together with their other best friend, Seamus Finnegan, together with Ron's family.

Hermione was really excited about it as she had heard that the Quidditch World Cups were always full of exciting matches and games that the professional Quidditch players involved themselves in. Sighing, she stretched again, slightly wincing as she felt a painful cramp in her neck from peering down into a book so long.



She had been so immersed in reading ***“Mysterious Magical Marvels”***, a book that she had received from her parents for her birthday, that she had lost track of time. The book was incredible interesting. It had been about very strange and unbelievable experiences of wizards and witches in the 19th century.

One very popular incident was with the Potter twins and how they had managed to survive You-know-who's killing curse. *You-know-who* was just about to kill them, starting with Harry but when he had said the curse, something had happened which resulted in his own death and the lightning scar on Harry's forehead.

Somehow, cursing Harry had caused a sort of scar on AJ's forehead as well. Hermione frowned slightly, scratching her head. It was true that Harry and AJ had survived the killing curse but how come AJ had ended up having a scar on her forehead as well when it was only Harry who was attacked?

*Maybe it was the whole being twins thing... There connection or something but have caused a scar to appear on AJ's forehead as well...Would it really affect the both of them physically like that? Hmm... Anyway, never mind...* Hermione thought, shrugging to herself.

She never really did care that much about the Potter twins anyway. Since Harry and AJ would do everything in their will possible to torment her, Ron and the rest of her friends in Gryffindor.

She could still remember the time Ron and Seamus had finally made Seeker and Keeper on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team back in their second year... She had been ecstatic for the both of them and had gone with them to watch their practice when the Slytherin team had suddenly sauntered into the field, all of them scowling up at the Gryffindors flying above.

Frowning at the memory, Hermione rolled her eyes in anger, silently cursing the Slytherins for thinking that they owned the whole damn bloody school just because they were mostly purebloods and were easily the school's richest house.

*They had no right to humiliate our team like that...Hermione thought angrily, her scowl intensifying.*

## **FLASHBACK**

*"Flint! What the bloody hell is the meaning of this? I thought I booked the damn field for the Gryffindors today! Get your team out of here!" Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor Quidditch captain shouted angrily at the Slytherin captain approaching.*

*Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team captain and the house prefect, who was standing in front of his team haughtily, stopped right in front of the Gryffindor team, the smirk on his hideous face growing wider.*

*"Sorry Wood but Prof. Snape gave us Slytherins permission to practice on the field today to train all our new members." He said, jeering as the big Slytherin chasers nodded their agreement behind him, flexing their huge bulk and muscles threateningly.*

*Wood narrowed his eyes as the rest of the Gryffindor team landed on the ground behind him at the scene, all of them with angry, indignant scowls on their faces.*

*"Get the hell out of here!" Fred Weasley taunted, looking incredibly pissed as he shoved one chaser in anger, who promptly smirked but said nothing, waiting for Flint's instructions.*

*"Yeah, we booked the field first!" George added, stepping forward with flashing eyes as the Slytherins chuckled their amusement, not at all intimidated by the other team.*

*Marcus Flint just lazily handed Wood the slip Snape had given him with his signature, a wide, innocent smile on his face as Wood turned purple after reading it and narrowed his eyes.*

*"How the bloody hell are we supposed to train our new seeker and chaser with you jerks, there?! For all we know, you could be spying on us!" He ranted.*

*Flint merely raised an eyebrow in response, peering behind Wood lazily to see the new members. "You have a new seeker and chaser? Who are they?" He asked in mild interest.*

*Ron and Seamus both proudly stepped forward, Ron clutching a snitch in one hand and a nimbus 2000 in the other as Seamus proudly clapped him on the back, grinning from ear to ear. "Oh, you like the broom? It was a courtesy of McGonagall for having such remarkable talent." He said smugly with a sly smile.*

*Flint just looked bored as he held a hand up and snapped his fingers casually, causing the boys behind him to part to reveal another smirking Slytherin behind. "Interesting Weasley... Funny how you seem to take a liking to following after my footsteps..." A familiar voice drawled as the famous, unbeatable Slytherin seeker stepped out from behind the tall Slytherin chasers.*

*Ron's ears turned red and his face darkened when Harry Potter stepped out, snitch in one hand and a gleaming Nimbus 2001 in the other, causing Ron, Seamus and Wood's jaws dropped open in shock.*

*"Oh, you like the broom?" Harry drawled, imitating Ron's voice earlier and causing the Gryffindor to narrow his eyes in resentment at him. "It was a gift courtesy of our new generous keeper." Harry continued casually with a sneer on his face, pointing behind him.*

*"My father is quite... affluent isn't he, Weasley? He can afford to buy me the best of everything... I doubt 'you' would understand that..." Draco Malfoy, Harry's best friend, challenged. He sneered as he walked up to stand beside Harry, his own Nimbus 2001 in his hand as he shot the Gryffindors his well-practiced Malfoy smirk.*

*Ron snapped his jaw shut and glared at him in utter loathing, Seamus nudging him to keep him from lunging after the smirking blonde in front of him. Harry sniggered and gave Draco a high five, ending in their secret handshake, making Hermione rolled her eyes at them.*

*"Boys." She muttered under her breath, sighing. "Especially, Slytherin boys." She added to herself after a moment.*

*"I don't suppose you have any more surprises for us, Flint?" Wood asked, rather nervously, his eyes slightly wide as he peered behind to see the other Slytherin team members.*

*"As a matter a fact, I have three more." Flint said, clearly enjoying this as the sadistic smile was clearly visible on his face.*

***"One."***

*Blaise Zabini walked up front with a Nimbus 2001 and a beater club. He gave the Gryffindors a big, annoying smile which was met with hateful glares, causing him to snigger in response.*

***"Two."***

*AJ walked up beside her twin and winked at Ron tauntingly, shouldering her own Nimbus 2001 and a beater club similar to that of Blaise's. Harry wrapped an arm around her protectively as Seamus and Hermione had to hold back Ron from pouncing on AJ. The girl just laughed in amusement, blowing the enraged redhead a mocking kiss.*

***"Three."*** *Flint finished, a full sneer on his face as the rest of the members of the Slytherin team shouldered his or her Nimbus 2001's. All the Gryffindors' jaws dropped open as they stared at the smug Slytherins in front of them, for once having nothing to say in reply to the other houses' torment.*

*"As Draco mentioned earlier, it was a gift courtesy from his father, Lucius Malfoy." Flint said proudly, putting both arms around Harry and Draco with a similar smirk on his face as the two younger students.*

*"So that's why he got chosen as keeper! That git couldn't block the quaffle if it danced buck naked in front of his face." Hermione pointed out in defense for her own House since all the members of the Gryffindor team appeared too tongue-tied to respond.*

*Draco's face darkened in fury and humiliation as he scowled angrily at her amidst the Gryffindor team's hearty laughter and amusement.*

*"Yeah. At least we Gryffindors got in on pure talent. We didn't have to 'buy' our way in." Seamus said snidely, sniggering.*

*Draco and Harry both stepped forward now, Harry looking furious at the insult directed to both his house and to his best friend. "No one really asked 'your' opinion, you filthy little mudblood!" Draco snapped in disgust at Hermione, pointing his wand at her.*

*The Gryffindors team gasped and it took both Wood and Angelina to hold back both Fred and George from leaping forward and scratching Malfoy's eyes out in unrelenting anger.*

*Ron and Seamus both turned an interesting shade of red and they both yanked their wands out of their scarlet robes and pointed it at the blonde Slytherin, anger evident in their flashing eyes.*

*Hermione's eyes widened as she took a step back, obviously deeply offended as her face clouded over in insult. Harry turned to glare at Draco, keeping his expression cool and emotionless as he spoke.*

*"Cool it Malfoy. She's just a weak, little girl with a big mouth. No reason to get all worked up." He reasoned coolly, using his hand to push Draco's outstretched wand down. Hermione looked surprised as she looked at Harry questioningly, searching his flat, cold eyes intently to see his intentions.*

*'Did Harry Potter just defend me?!' She asked herself incredulously, her eyes clearly showing him her confusion but Harry just gave her a blank look, raising an eyebrow haughtily after several moments.*

*Draco scowled at him, his silver eyes flashing in anger and his handsome face twisted into a hideous snarl. "Why? You defending the little mudblood, Potter? I always knew you had a soft spot for losers, you little wuss!" He challenged angrily.*

*AJ, who had walked up beside Draco, nudged him sharply, her eyes wide and alarmed upon hearing what he had just said. Draco looked at her in irritation, his face scrunched up in anger. "What?!" He hissed angrily, raising an eyebrow.*

*AJ shook her head in panic, giving him a pointed look. "Probably not a good idea to challenge Harry like that Draco..." She whispered with wide eyes. "Why the bloody hell not? Why the fuck should I be afraid of him?" Draco hissed back again.*

*"Because... It completely pisses him off. It's from a personal experience." AJ whispered back, shaking her head and walking back behind him beside Blaise, who was just watching the exchange between Harry and Draco nervously.*

*Harry just stared at his best friend with his infamous death glare, his form slowly tensing in anger.*

*"Don't fucking assume things about me, Draco. You know how much it I hate that. You wouldn't want me as your enemy... 'You' of all people should know this already..." He threatened coldly in a dark and authoritative tone of voice.*

*Draco instantly knew he had gone too far when he saw the undeniable rage in Harry's eyes, blinking and instantly backing down, looking away and shoving his wand back into his pocket.*

*It wasn't that he was afraid of Harry or anything but being Harry's best friend, he knew the secret, dangerous anger Harry released every now and then when someone pushed him over the edge and he wasn't about to be the one to cause it this time...*

*Harry was even more of a hot-tempered Slytherin than he was, which was probably why everyone else, higher 'or' lower years, feared angering him, not wanting to end up in the hospital wing in battered bruises and slashes.*

*Instead, Draco just sneered at Weasley and Finnegan once again, redirecting his anger at the Gryffindors as Harry seemed to calm down beside him, his eyes cold and lifeless once again.*

*The rest of the Gryffindor and Slytherin team members just watched the whole exchange between the second years in tense silence after Draco's little crack about Hermione, everyone looking as though they were waiting for a bomb to go off any minute.*

*“Watch your mouth, Malfoy!” Seamus snapped, narrowing his eyes as he pointed his wand directly at Draco threateningly. “Yeah, you insufferable prick! You will pay for that crack, Malfoy! Eat slugs!” Ron yelled furiously, his taped-up wand aimed directly at Draco’s face.*

*“Ron, no its okay! Forget it, I—”*

*Hermione didn’t get to finish her sentence as Ron instantly shouted out a curse, a grim look of determination on his face.*

***BANG!!***

*“OOMPH!!”*

*Ron’s taped-up, broken wand had backfired once again and instead of hitting Draco, it had ended up hitting him in the stomach instead. The Gryffindor groaned loudly as he stumbled back against the ground and made a pained grimace, his face turning an interesting shade of green.*

*“Ron!” Hermione cried out in concern, kneeling down to help her friend who was now looking as though he was going to throw up any minute. The Gryffindors all surrounded Ron in concern, kneeling down beside him in inspection.*

*“Ron! Are you okay?” Wood asked him, looking at his new seeker in concern as Ron let out a groan again, clutching his stomach. He didn’t get to answer as he instantly began to throw up slugs all over the grass, causing his teammates to yelp in disgust and move away from him in alarm.*

*“Ron!!” Hermione yelled out again, the only one attempting to go near him besides Seamus. “Ugh!” Ron muttered as he threw up another slug where he knelt down weakly on the grass, turning red in both pain and embarrassment.*

*“Very interesting, Weasel!! Too bad you missed me! I can’t figure out if it’s because of your bloody wand or your lack of any skill!” Draco taunted, beginning to laugh hysterically at the sight.*

*Hermione narrowed her eyes as the whole Slytherin team followed, laughing uncontrollably in amusement, looking at the Gryffindors with big smirks on their faces. Blaise buried his head into AJ's shoulder and began laughing loudly, having to hold on to his best friend for support.*

*AJ was giggling herself but Hermione thought she saw a flash of concern in her eyes, looking as though the laughter she was emitting was coming out forced. 'It's probably just my imagination. Since when did that nasty bitch have a conscience?' She thought bitterly as she rubbed Ron's back while he threw up more slugs onto the grass.*

*Harry was smirking sadistically next to Draco with his arms crossed over his chest and was shaking slightly with silent laughter, amusement clearly dancing in his emerald green eyes as Draco slung an arm around him for support, laughing too hard to stand straight.*

*Hermione glared at the two of them but this only caused Harry to wink at her, infuriating her even more. "Take my advice Weasley. Buy a new wand. You might actually get to say an actual curse that might work the way you want it to." He said snidely, sniggering, causing Draco to laugh harder.*

*"Oh, shut up Potter! Quit being such a jerk!" Seamus shouted at him in indignation and anger. "Yeah, get the hell out of here!" Wood yelled at the Slytherins. The Slytherin team surprisingly obliged and sauntered shakily to the other side of the field, still laughing loudly at the sight.*

*The Slytherin duo, however, were still smirking and watching Ron, Seamus and Hermione with amusement, their arms crossed over their chest. "Get out of here both of you! For one, just leave us the bloody hell alone!" Hermione screamed at him.*

*Harry looked at her blankly again and met his intense emerald eyes with her coffee brown ones. They stared at each other coldly for a long time, each one not wanting to lose to the other's glare when Harry slowly turned around and sauntered back to his teammates, a surprised Draco following after him.*



*Hermione stared after Harry's back silently for a moment before she followed Ron, who walked with help from Seamus, back to Hogwarts.*

### **END OF FLASHBACK**

She didn't really understand how Harry Potter, the hero of the wizarding world who had killed lord Voldemort, could be such a sexist, self-centered bastard. Sure he did live up to his role by saving a lot of wizards and witches every year but still...

How he acts so superior all the time is just so bloody annoying! And the fact that he and Malfoy go out of their way to irritate her and her friends was always frustrating on her part.

She really didn't know why a lot of girls liked him or Draco for that matter. They seemed, to Hermione, nothing but stuck-up jerks with nothing better to do than to cause trouble. Sure, she had to admit... Harry was good-looking...

*Agh, okay! Maybe gorgeous! Breathtakingly hot and sexy even, but looks weren't always everything!* Hermione thought to herself, flushing dark red in the darkness of her bedroom.

His popularity really didn't matter to Hermione either though she had to admit that Harry was indeed very popular in school 'and' outside school.

Harry was... He was just one of those guys that would charm a girl just to bed her and then leave her broken once he had gotten what he wanted from her... *Those emerald eyes of his had always gotten him got what he wanted...* Hermione thought dreamily.

Then, blushing furiously to herself, she shook her head, feeling foolish and ashamed of herself for thinking such an idea. *Honestly!* She thought indignantly, still looking a bit flushed and flustered as she tried in vain to calm herself down.

*This is Potter, we're talking about! The biggest jerk I had ever met! Well, aside from Malfoy, of course... And they were in Slytherin, for Pete's sake! Nothing but trouble!* She scolded herself.

*And he's so full of himself, anyway! Probably already started lining up the Patil twins for another 'date' or something... I swear... I have no doubts why he and that self-centered brat, Malfoy get along.* Hermione thought bitterly.

*Even his twin had a better personality than that jerk and AJ Potter was the bitchiest girl around school when she wanted to be.* Hermione added, thinking of how AJ, her Slytherin rival, would always taunt her relentlessly every time they met up.

*Never managed to beat me in class though...* Hermione thought smugly, a small smile slowly spreading on her face as she briefly recalled the horrified, furious look AJ seemed to have again and again whenever the teachers would announce Hermione as the highest student in the year.

*Still...* She couldn't explain why Harry had come on to her the way he did their previous year before... It had been a very disturbing experience indeed. She hadn't forgotten the incident and had been thinking about it all summer.

Did he have a thing for her? *NO! Of course not!* The idea itself was ridiculous! Hermione wasn't the type of girl whom Harry usually went after. He liked those pretty, popular girls. Girls who carried mirrors in their robe pockets... Girls who were self-obsessed with the way they looked.... It was still a bit weird...

She shuddered involuntarily when she thought of what had happened between them in their third year... It was still fresh in her head...

## ***FLASHBACK***

*She had been walking to the Potions classroom with Neville through the cold, abandoned Slytherin dungeons when Neville had suddenly tripped on his robes and fell forward, face first, to the cold dungeon floor.*

*Hermione, being the good friend that she was, had helped him pick up all his books, parchment and quills when all of a sudden, they heard a familiar, cold, drawling voice.*

*“Aw... Well look what we have here...The squib and the mudblood... Hogwarts newest and sweetest couple...” Malfoy said in a mocking voice, sneering as he deliberately stepped on a piece of parchment Neville was reaching for, causing the boy to squeak in fear.*

*“Get lost or something, Malfoy! We don’t want to waste any time talking to a slimy git like you! Go find someone else to bother!” Hermione snapped at him. Malfoy looked highly amused, raising a delicate eyebrow in question.*

*“Temper, temper, Granger... I was just curious after all...You don’t have to get all rude and touchy...” He said, raising his eyebrows in mock innocence. “Get going Neville! I’ll catch up with you in a sec!” Hermione said to the other boy. Neville looked uncertain about leaving her there but nodded and ran off to the Potions classroom in a hurry.*

*Draco looked mildly impressed, removing his foot from Neville’s parchment as he stared after Neville’s retreating form, sniggering under his breath. “Very noble and brave of you, Granger. Sending that fat-assed squib off and staying to face the big bad Slytherin.” He taunted, smirking.*

*Hermione just scowled back, raising her chin up at him in bold defiance. “Indeed Granger... Very unbecoming of you... You never cease to amaze me.” Another familiar voice drawled, causing Hermione to look up and see Harry Potter walking up beside Draco with a big, taunting sneer on his face, Pansy clutching his left arm tightly at his side.*

*Hermione felt her heartbeat race nervously in panic. She had to get out of there now. She didn’t like being alone with these two. It wasn’t a safe situation to be in, that was for certain...*

*Pansy was looking extremely pleased with herself and was giving Hermione a rather disgusted grimace. She turned her pug nose up higher at her and clutched Harry’s arm tighter, causing the boy turn and give the girl a charming smile that didn’t seem to reach his cold eyes.*

*“Aw...Well look what we have here... Pretty-boy Potter and his pretty bitch, Parkinson...” Hermione spat out daringly, her eyes intensely challenging. Pansy’s eyes blazed at the harsh insult. “How dare you, you good for nothing mudblood! No one talks about me like that!” She barked in anger but Harry ignored her as he and Draco exchanged grins.*

*“You don’t have to be so touchy Granger. Is it that time of the month again?” Harry leered causing both Draco and Pansy to laugh loudly. Hermione burned bright red in indignation and embarrassment, growling at the raven-haired Slytherin in anger.*

*“Shut up Potter! Why don’t you go and wank yourself off or something?! Or better yet, go get one of your ‘admirers’ to do it for you since you’d screw anybody anyway!” She snapped again, gathering up her thing.*

*Both Draco and Pansy sucked in their breaths in fear and looked warily at Harry, who had tensed up in anger, his facial expression darkening. Hermione gulped and hurried to get inside the classroom when Harry grabbed her arm roughly.*

*“Didn’t your mommy ever teach you to show some respect to the Slytherins, little Gryffindor girl?!” Harry hissed contemptuously, his eyes flashing like the lightning bolt on his forehead.*

*Hermione narrowed her eyes and struggled to get her arm free from his death grasp, her eyes searching the corridor frantically for someone to call out for help. “Let go of me, you jerk! Let me go!!” Hermione protested wildly.*

*“Pansy, babe, why don’t you go ahead for a while? I believe I have a lesson to teach Ms. Granger.” Harry said, shoving Hermione with his hands roughly, pinning her shoulders to the wall. “Okay, Harrykins. See you later.” Pansy said, her eyes wide and nervous before walking off towards the Potions classroom.*

*“You interested in the mudblood, Harry?” Draco asked casually, visibly relaxing from where he was leaning back against the opposite dungeon wall, his arms crossed over his chest, a single eyebrow raised in surprise.*

*Harry smirked, his eyes never leaving Hermione's frightened but hateful glare. "Just want to teach her some manners, Draco." He replied. "We're already late for Potions you know..." Draco pointed out, yawning as he checked his wristwatch lazily.*

*"Get your bloody hands off me!" Hermione raged, struggling wildly with her captor but to no such avail. "Hey Draco, why don't you go off as well?" Harry suggested, a sly smile on his face as he winked at his best friend.*

*Draco rolled his eyes but got the idea, chuckling in amusement. "Whatever. I'll save you a seat, Potter. Try not to lose us some house points." He said as he winked back knowingly, nodding and walking off, his robe swishing behind him.*

*Harry only smirked wider and clutched Hermione's jaw tightly to make her face tilt into his blazing emerald green eyes. "You're getting tougher, Granger. Not bad at all." He said, slowly flashing the famous gorgeous smile that won him any girl he wanted.*

*Hermione didn't say anything but her eyes just showed him the hatred she felt only for him. She stiffened when she felt Harry lean forward and whisper something to her. "Keep it up and I just might take a more 'personal' interest in you." He whispered, his hot breath tickling her ear.*

*"You wish, Potter!" Hermione snapped, spitting at him in utter disgust. Harry froze for a minute, wiping the spit away from his face before he began to laugh lightly. "What the hell is so funny?" Hermione demanded, struggling with him again.*

*Harry just looked at her with his intense green eyes, immediately distinguishing any flame of courage that she had left once again. 'Where was Ron and his impulsive anger when you need him?' She thought nervously.*

*Gently, he lifted a hand and pushed a strand of hair from Hermione's face, stroking her cheek. Hermione felt her breathing go rapid as Harry's intense green eyes studied her face intently, before moving up and down her body as though he could see right through her clothes.*

*Lifting his face, he let his smirk bloom into another full, charming smile which didn't seem to reach his cold, emotionless eyes. "You think so low of me don't you? That's a first..." He said as he ran a finger gently down her neck in a seductive manner.*

*Hermione nervously shut her eyes and tensed as he leaned in to whisper something again. "You can't escape me, Granger. I get everything, anything and 'anyone' I want. A mudblood like you is bloody hell no fucking exception. You just wait. I'll have my way with you soon enough when I feel like it. No girl escapes me." Harry muttered darkly to her, causing a shiver to run down her spine.*

*He pulled back, the smile gone from his face and was replaced by a threatening and intimidating glare. Before Hermione knew what she was doing, she freed one of her hands and slapped him, hard.*

*Harry just chuckled in amusement, a low, sensually seductive tone of voice and laughter he used that would have made any other girl except Hermione shiver in enticement.*

*"So feisty... What's wrong? Did I scare you? Do you want me to get your little guard dog Weasley? Or do you plainly just like it rough?" He taunted again, smirking wider at Hermione's scandalized expression.*

*"You bastard! I—"*

*"Harry! What the hell are you doing?!" A voice interrupted Hermione, causing Harry to back away from the wall and Hermione to break free from his grasp. They both turned and saw AJ Potter, Harry's twin sister, rushing up to him with a demanding scowl on her features, glaring at the two in suspicion.*

*"Come on! Prof. Snape will be pissed at us for being late!" She said, yanking her brother's arm. "Yeah, yeah, don't worry about it." Harry brushed off irritably, rolling his eyes at her behavior.*

*With his usual cool facial expression on once again, he ran a hand through his silky raven hair and turned his sparkling emerald eyes back to Hermione, causing a lump down her throat.*

*"What the hell are you doing here with Granger? Are you two friends now?" AJ taunted when she saw Hermione, throwing a sneer as she eyed the other girl up and down in disdain.*

*"That is something that I will personally make sure, never happens. You both stay the bloody hell away from me." Hermione said sharply, her cheeks flaming as she gathered her things hastily.*

*Harry let a slow, evil grin creep to his face as he watched her calmly, amused at the hurried, panicky movements of Hermione's trembling fingers. "Likewise, Granger." AJ said, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she raised an eyebrow haughtily.*

*"I'll see you around, Granger." Harry said calmly as Hermione bolted away from him in horror. She only caught a glimpse of him as she turned around, seeing AJ looking at him suspiciously as he only gave her a smirk and shrugged, winking.*

### **END OF FLASHBACK**

Hermione shuddered again but this time it was out of fear. The intensity of Potter's eyes seemed to do that to a person most of the time. There was just something else about that gaze that seemed to strike her. It hadn't left her mind at all during the entire summer.

What was it? *Lust? Desire? Darkness* or simply just plain sadistic amusement... Pure evil or darkness... She had always been somewhat afraid of what she might see behind those beautiful emerald orbs of Potter's... She was afraid of the secret that lies behind that beautiful mask of emerald... Afraid of what she might discover...

Hermione knew she shouldn't be daydreaming about her enemy but she couldn't help but develop a sort of crush on the so-called Harry Potter sometime during their third year after that...

It was only an infatuation of course, nothing too serious. She just found that damn boy too damn attractive and too damn sexy, dammit!

She certainly didn't need to question why Harry always had a new, adoring, giggly ditz clinging to his arm every week or why Pansy

Parkinson always loved to brag to everyone about having a 'serious' relationship with Harry.

This, however, was the very reason why she should avoid him altogether.

*Nope. Hermione Anne Granger certainly should NOT have a crush on Harry James Potter.* Hermione thought to herself firmly.

Harry Potter is nothing but trouble and she knew this very well... Nothing good will come out of having this silly little crush on him... He wasn't even her type for Merlin's sake! She definitely didn't fancy bad boys! Or Slytherins for that matter!

*What's the matter with me?!* She asked herself angrily, sighing out loud in frustration. The question was, would she be able to remember that the next time she meets those intense, glowing yet beautiful emeralds?

She could only hope that the answer was yes...

**A/N: CHAPTER EDITED.** Aw... Poor Hermione!! She's developed a wittle crush on our sexy little Slytherin! Hehe.... Wonder what's going to happen next... Do you think they actually have a chance together?! Hehe... Well, obviously, you don't really need to answer that since this is a Harry/Hermione fic after all but still... I wonder what awaits our beautiful, innocent Hermione... And more importantly, what awaits our sexy, bad Slytherin Harry.... wink Hehehe... Well, hope you enjoyed that one! **PLEASE REVIEW!**



## Chapter 4- Truth or Dare

"Come along then, children. We mustn't dawdle. " Narcissa Malfoy, Draco's mother, said as she led the three Slytherins outside Malfoy Manor. Poppet was following right behind her, holding all of their magically reduced baggage in his tiny palm.

They were to walk to a certain hill just a couple of blocks away from Malfoy Manor since Draco's house was in a wizarding neighborhood anyway. All around them, Harry could see wizards and witches with their children walking to a designated area as he caught sight of some familiar teenagers when they passed.

Draco followed right after Poppet, looking quite uncomfortable since he was wearing muggle clothing- a silk, silver turtleneck and black slacks just as Harry wore the day before.

Draco's mother had told them that the ministry of magic had especially ordered all witches and wizards who were to watch the Quidditch world cup that they were to wear muggle clothing when they would be walking to the site of the Quidditch world cup.

Harry had asked Draco how they would be getting there but Draco had merely said "*Port key*" which had puzzled both Harry and AJ. Now, walking up beside Draco, Harry had wore another pair of slacks since he had taken a liking to wearing classy outfits but this time, he wore an emerald green turtleneck, which AJ had to admit, gave him and Draco the proper Slytherin 'aura' about them.

She, however, had worn a skirt made of black leather, which showed off a lot of her long, smooth legs. She topped it with a pale green midriff top, covered by a white cotton jacket, only the first two bottom buttons were buttoned. She finished with black boots that reached up to her knees and were extremely fit on her small, petite feet.

Harry had shaken his head at the sight of her outfit while Draco had just stared, his silver eyes glistening in pure relentless lust and desire as he ran them up and down her slender frame, thankful Harry wasn't looking at him at the moment.

Even Narcissa had smiled at the sight in amusement, noticing the gaze her son was directing towards his female friend. However, they had all packed their wizard's robes with them since they had all agreed to change into them when they got to the Quidditch site.

"Couldn't you have worn something less revealing AJ?" Harry growled as he gave a passing teenage wizard who checked his sister out his meanest glare. The boy gave Harry a nervous smile and hurried on faster, obviously intimidated by the other boy's anger.

AJ laughed lightly at the protective tone in her brother's voice, raising an eyebrow at him. "Why would I want to? I like being the center of attention, as you yourself do, if I'm not mistaken, *brother dear*." She kidded sarcastically.

Draco gave her a grin while Harry just cursed under his breath and was about to say something when a tall, blonde girl walked past him. Harry stopped immediately and paused to check out the girl's legs, causing both his sister and best friend to laugh.

"Harry, don't reprimand other guys for checking out your sister when you yourself are checking out other girls." Draco said in amusement, leading them up to a small line of wizards. Harry, however, wasn't paying attention and was instead, glaring at someone behind Draco, his emerald green eyes glinting in unhidden malice.

"Diggory." He regarded coldly, his handsome face breaking out into a mocking sneer at the other taller boy in front of him. Both Draco and AJ turned to see Cedric Diggory, an extremely handsome boy who was three years older than they were and was in his last year at Hogwarts in Hufflepuff house.

Cedric Diggory was easily known as the school heartthrob since aside from his extremely good looks, he got very high marks, had a very charming, friendly and charismatic personality and was the captain and seeker of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team.

Everyone actually believed Cedric as Mr. Perfect and despite being a Hufflepuff; he had a lot of admirers. He was basically the most popular guy in the school, even more than Harry and Draco, since he was a seventh year.

*Probably one of the reasons why Harry and Draco hate him so much...* AJ thought to herself, shaking her head in amusement. The other was because he beat Slytherin in the Quidditch match during their third year when Harry had fallen from his broom due to a dementor on the grounds.

However, AJ found Cedric completely charming and sweet and had even developed a small crush before in third year though it had not lasted long and now, she considered the boy as one of her good friends.

"Hey Harry! Draco! Amanda! Good seeing you three here." Cedric greeted with his famous grin that made girls turn into pudding. "Er... I wish we could say the same Diggory." Draco said coldly, sneering as he eyed the other boy up and down in unmasked loathing.

Cedric didn't seem to notice Draco's cold tone of voice as he seemed to grin wider, his eyes sparkling in warmth. "Thanks. We're headed to the Quidditch World Cup as well. My dad is with me right now." He told them, pointing to Amos Diggory and Narcissa talking to each other in a light conversation.

Narcissa was eyeing Amos with distaste on her delicate features but Amos didn't seem to notice Narcissa's cold attitude and just kept on talking animatedly, chuckling ever now and then.

"So, did you make Head boy this year, Cedric?" AJ asked casually, giving him a warm smile. She didn't tell Harry and Draco that she and Cedric were actually pretty close friends. Perhaps it was due to the fact that he had tutored her on advanced Arithmancy in third year back when she was taking extra classes.

Cedric smiled back at her in response, a suddenly shy and embarrassed look on his handsome face. "Actually, yes I did. It was actually a pleasant surprise since my grades were not as high as I expected them to be." He said modestly.

Harry and Draco rolled their eyes at each other and walked away from him as he and AJ continued to talk to each other while waiting in the line. "That wasn't high enough for you?! Ced, you were the

highest student in your year! What more did you expect” AJ exclaimed, laughing.

Cedric laughed as well, a faint touch of light pink on his slightly tanned face. “Yeah I guess... So... How bout you Amanda? What’s happened to you?” He asked, giving her a warm, affectionate smile.

AJ felt herself squirming uncomfortably under his intense gaze, not at all liking the way Cedric always seemed to use her full name instead of just calling her ‘AJ’. It made her feel extremely uncomfortable...

“Well... Nothing much really... It’s been quite a boring summer.” She kidded lightly, trying to lighten the mood. Cedric laughed in agreement, shaking his head in response.

“Nothing is boring when it comes to you, Potter. Any new admirers so far?” He teased, a sparkle of mirth in his eyes. AJ blushed dark red in embarrassment at the implied flirtatious tease as she laughed nervously.

“I wish...” She said lightly, still fidgeting around uncomfortably. Before Cedric could say anything else, Draco and Harry had come back again, Draco deliberately cutting right in front of them, his eyes cold and hateful.

“Hey Diggory! You’re dad’s calling you.” He snapped sharply with a strange hint of challenge and possessiveness in his voice as he shoved Cedric lightly away from AJ, a dark scowl on his features.

Cedric looked surprised but offered only a politely confused expression as he nodded in response.

“Okay, I—”

“Well, Ced! These some of your friends from school?” Amos Diggory, Cedric’s father, greeted as he put a hand on his son’s shoulder. Cedric smiled sheepishly, shrugging as Draco and Harry both let out a snort under their breaths, smirking up at the seventh-year in amusement.

"You could say that, dad. This is Draco, Amanda and Harry." He introduced, pointing to each one as he said their names. His dad's eyes widened slightly as his eyes did the familiar flicking up to their scars, looking extremely impressed.

"*Potter?! Well, that's quite a surprise...*" He marveled slightly, giving both Harry and AJ a warm smile. Draco rolled his eyes derisively, obviously irritated. "Here we go..." He groaned to himself as Harry smirked and AJ squirmed uncomfortably.

"This is Amanda, Ced?" Amos asked, stepping up to AJ and studying her curiously, peering at her, making her feel as though she was some kind of new specimen under a microscope. Cedric looked embarrassed and shot her an apologetic smile, sighing loudly at his dad's behavior.

"Well, well! You've got yourself a fine girlfriend! I can see why you like her!" Amos said jovially, giving AJ a grin. "Dad!" Cedric hissed, his eyes wide as he looked as though he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

Amos paid him no attention, still grinning at AJ who had turned as red as the Gryffindor Quidditch robes in utter humiliation. Draco narrowed his eyes in utmost anger while AJ just looked like she wanted to hide behind her brother's invisibility cloak.

"Dad, AJ's not my girlfriend. She's just one of my friends." Cedric told his dad, shaking his head. Once again, Mr. Diggory didn't pay him any attention since he was now looking at Harry with a strange glint in his eye.

"And this is Harry Potter? Well, Ced, that's one thing you'll be telling your children one day! You beat Harry Potter at Quidditch!" He exclaimed proudly. This time, both Harry and Draco's eyes narrowed darkly as AJ sensed her brother tense in anger, seeing his hands clench into tight fists. "It was an accident dad. Harry fell off his broom." Cedric said, looking really embarrassed now.

"But you didn't, did you Ced? Nope, hung on there until you finally caught the snitch right before he did!" Amos said, grinning widely. AJ paled and looked away from the scene while Harry clenched his

hands into tighter fists, watching as Amos Diggory began to walk away.

“Well, I think we’ve chatted long enough. Come along then, Cedric. Time to get to the port key.” He said as he dragged his son away. AJ glanced warily at Harry and found that he was still glaring at the back of Cedric’s head but he had relaxed slightly.

“Cool it Harry.” She whispered to him, nudging him gently when she noticed the anger still evident in his eyes. Harry didn’t reply but he nodded slowly, scowling and turning away from the Diggorys.

Narcissa walked back to the three of them with Poppet at her heels, a disdainful scowl on her elegant features before she spoke up. “Let’s get going too children. We shall be taking the port key now.” Narcissa said daintily as she let them follow her to where an old boot was on the ground.

“What are we doing looking at an old boot?” Harry whispered to AJ, raising an eyebrow. AJ shrugged stupidly, for once not knowing the answer to such a question. “Beats me. Maybe it’s a wizard thing...” She whispered back in utter bewilderment.

Draco had to laugh at his friends’ confused faces, smirking at their obvious ignorance at all things magical. “Look you two, just follow whatever we do and you’ll be fine.” He said, obviously amused.

Harry shrugged carelessly, briefly raising a single eyebrow for a minute before he turned back to look at the boot. “Alright, everyone touch the port key.” Amos Diggory said as he held out the boot in the middle of the circle of people.

Draco and his mother both gingerly touched the boot with a single finger along with Poppet, a bored look on their faces as Harry and AJ, both feeling foolish, did the same.

*What would those stupid muggles say when they saw a bunch of fully-grown people crowding around an old boot?* AJ thought stupidly, holding back her laughter at the hilarity of the idea.

Pretty soon, she felt a jerk behind and soon felt as though something was pulling her navel forward. She looked around and saw that everyone else beside her was being pulled along with her for the ride, causing her eyes to wide in awe and amazement.

When the pulling stopped, they landed with a rather violent thud, AJ falling into Harry causing both of them to fall into Draco, who in turn lost his balance and fell on the ground in a tangled heap of limbs.

"You okay, Amanda?" Cedric asked in concern as he offered a hand to help her up, hiding an amused smile at the sight of the three popular haughty Slytherins clumsily crashing to the floor.

AJ gladly took it, blushing in embarrassment at her brief moment of clumsiness as she slowly raised herself up. "T-thanks." She murmured, dusting her robes out of old habit again, glancing around casually.

Harry mumbled another foul curse word to himself and raised himself up before he helped Draco up as well, the two of them dusting themselves right after. AJ watched the two of them in utter amazement and disbelief... She was amazed at how relaxed Harry acted towards Draco.

As she had remembered, the two had instantly become best friends ever since they had met and sometimes, their unique brotherly bond towards each other, despite being known as the two most coldhearted Slytherins in school, absolutely amazed her.

Somehow, she knew Harry and Draco respected each other in a way that they would respect no one else, recognizing each others' abilities and standing up for the other in times of peril or simply just to defend their friend's honor.

Despite his reputation as a death eater's son however, Harry and AJ trusted Draco with their lives, knowing that Draco was as loyal to their friendship much more than he was to his own family name.

And the fact that the two not only respected each other greatly but also commanded a great deal of respect from everyone else around them struck her as incredible... Sometimes, she couldn't even help

feeling as though *they* were the real twins and *she* was the one out of place...

It was strange though... From what AJ could see around her, she knew very well that Draco respected no one and that he would smugly look down on others that he believed were much more inferior than he was... It was only Harry he seemed to respect with a special honor somehow...

"Let's go AJ." Harry ordered sharply, breaking her through her thoughts and yanking his sister away from Cedric, following after Draco who was right behind his mother. Harry looked around them in keen interest, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings.

They were now in some sort of camp where wizards and witches were currently setting up magical tents or even miniature houses on their respective places. "Where did you reserve us a place, mother?" Draco asked his mother as she led them towards many more tents.

Narcissa gave him a smile, her eyes flashing slightly with pride and arrogance that only a Malfoy would dare to possess. "Don't worry Draco. I had your father reserve us a place in a much richer, classier environment. We don't have to mingle with these commoners." She said haughtily.

Draco grinned in agreement, relief obvious on his features. "That's good. I wouldn't want to meet up with any other losers." He said derisively, shaking his head.

As soon as they reached a spacious clearing with a lot of miniature-looking classy houses on a certain camp, Poppet began magically setting up their own miniature mansion.

Once they were finished, AJ was astonished to see that it looked like a much smaller version of Malfoy Manor. "Run along and buy yourselves some souvenirs then, children. I'm expecting a friend of mine over for tea." Narcissa said as she walked inside.

"Souvenirs?" Harry asked Draco, eyebrow cocked up in inquiry. Draco rolled his eyes, annoyed at his best friend's ignorance. "Of course, Harry. Souvenirs! Come on, let's go! I want to buy one of



those new Victor Krum figures.” He said, grabbing Harry and AJ’s hand and yanking them towards a crowded area where a sea of wizards, young and old, were buying.

While they were there, they saw a couple more of their friends hanging around in the crowd and a couple more of their schoolmates, only acknowledging their enthusiastic greetings with curt nods and glances.

They were a bit surprised to see others in the crowd as well like Cho Chang, Oliver Wood, and even Marcus Flint, their old Quidditch captain who had graduated last year. The old Slytherin captain had been ecstatic when he had seen Harry and had introduced the young, proud seeker to his parents. Harry had flirted with Cho for a short while before both Draco and AJ had dragged him off to buy a couple of Viktor Krum figures.

When they had finished, their moneybags were lighter but they were all carrying a lot of expensive souvenirs in their hands, heading back towards their house. Harry had even bought the three of them Omnioculars and Draco had bought them all miniature Victor Krum figures which would walk around by itself like a real person.

“Which team are you cheering for, Harry?” Draco asked, munching on a chocolate frog as the three of them lay down exhausted on their beds inside their miniature house an hour later.

Harry, who couldn’t really move much since AJ had fallen asleep in his embrace, looked up from where he was lying lazily on his own bed. Yawning, he gave Draco a sleepy grin.

“I’m not sure... I’m thinking Ireland... I hear they have a pretty good seeker.” He said, gently stroking his sister’s hair in an affectionate manner as he talked. Draco scowled at him. “*Ireland*?! You’ve got to be kidding Harry! Everyone knows that *Bulgaria* is much better!” He argued indignantly.

Harry chuckled in amusement, shaking his head. “I don’t really care who wins, Draco. As long as I get to see some kick-ass Quidditch, I’ll be satisfied.” He said, shrugging slightly. He winced when AJ shifted

slightly, clutching him even tighter and snuggling into him as she mumbled something Harry didn't quite get in her sleep.

Draco watched with an amused smile on his face how Harry whispered some gentle words to his sister to help her drift back to sleep, stroking her hair fondly. AJ mumbled something again and yawned, pulling the blanket tighter around herself as she drifted off into a peaceful sleep again, her breathing coming in steady once more.

*What I would give to be in Harry's place right now with AJ cuddled up in my arms...* Draco thought wistfully to himself as he eyed the girl for a minute with an unreadable look in his eye before he shook his head and looked at Harry again.

Harry had smiled slightly and kissed his twin on the forehead before he turned to look back at his best friend only to see that Draco was grinning at him in amazement. Harry looked annoyed as he instantly narrowed his eyes in question at the blonde Slytherin.

"What?!" He snapped irritably. Draco shook his head, shrugging nonchalantly. "I'm just amazed how gentle you can be when you handle AJ but still be the bastard you are. Just ironic I guess..." He said, smirking.

Harry rolled his eyes in response. "She's my twin sister, Draco. Of course I love her. Which reminds me... Can I ask you something?" He asked, looking at him intently. Draco nodded and sat up on the bed, yawning before he turned curious eyes to Harry.

Harry looked thoughtful as he eyed Draco with an almost wary, threatening look in his eye that he usually only reserved for their enemies. "Well, I just want to know... I've noticed for quite a long time now, ever since the beginning of second year how you look at my sister... How exactly do you feel about her, Draco?"

Draco flushed darkly and turned away, looking embarrassed, flushed, nervous and angry all at the same time. "That is none of your damn business Potter! I have no bloody idea what you're talking about! I don't feel anything for that skinny little brat!" He snapped sharply, his eyes avoiding Harry's gaze.

Harry narrowed his eyes but held back his anger since he couldn't make any sudden movements with his sister sleeping in his arms. "It is so my business Draco. I just want to know if you're serious about her or if you just think of her the way all the other perverts in school do because believe it or not, I will not let you touch her in anyway. Is it *lust* or *love*?" He retorted dangerously in a slow, carefully measured tone of voice.

Draco stood up from the bed and walked over in front of a mirror, staring coldly at his own reflection as he rested his hands on the table in front of it, breathing heavily. Harry's emerald eyes followed him the whole time from where he was lying on the bed, not blinking as he remained deathly silent, waiting for his answer.

"I...I honestly...I don't know Harry..." Draco stammered, running a surprisingly shaky hand through his hair. Harry wrinkled his forehead in confusion, his face twisting into a furious scowl.

"What the hell do you—"

"I honestly *don't* know... I just don't want to deal with that right now... Please, understand... There's just something different about the way I feel for AJ... Something I can't understand... Something about her that just... I don't know! I just—" Draco voice trailed off, looking completely lost.

"What don't you understand, exactly?" Harry asked sharply, his eyes still narrowed warily but the harshness in them had softened somewhat. Draco took a deep breath, turning around to face him.

"That's just it. I don't know... I have absolutely no idea and that's why my mind is just so bloody fucked up right now. She's the only girl who...She just makes me feel so... *alive* Harry... There's something about her that's so alluring that I don't see in anyone else...I need time to think about the answer to your question." He answered honestly, rubbing his forehead.

Harry met his eyes for a minute, staring at him with his intense, penetrating gaze for a long time as though trying to read the sincerity in his eyes until finally, he nodded slowly, quirking his lips in a small, understanding smile.

Draco shot him a weak grin before he sighed wearily and collapsed on his bed again, staring at the ceiling. "Hey... Don't worry about it Draco. I trust your intentions anyway. You may be a bloody jerk most of the time but I know you're still sincere about your feelings about a person. I just... don't want AJ getting involved with anyone at the moment." Harry told him.

Draco laughed loudly. "Aw... Potter! I didn't know you cared!" He kidded, pretending to wipe his eyes. Harry raised an eyebrow before giving in and laughing softly, not wanting to wake up his twin.

"Okay then, Potter. Seeing that you have broken down the barriers to my personal life, I have a question for you." Draco said, looking at him expectantly. Harry raised both his eyebrow curiously and nodded for him to continue, almost dreading the question that Draco might ask him.

"Who have you got in mind for your latest challenge when we get back to Hogwarts?" Draco asked, a knowing smirk on his face. Harry laughed lightly and shook his head. "Now don't you go and spoil the big surprise, Draco." He said casually, smirking.

Draco, however, looked deep in thought, his eyes glinting in amusement and sadistic laughter. "I still can't believe what you did to that Gryffindor Lavender Brown last year..." He said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Harry scowled in response, his face twisting in disgust at the mere memory of his so-called ex-girlfriend. He didn't even know if he should call her that since they had barely lasted a week, Harry dumping her soon after.

"Well she was following me around and clinging to me like I was a loyal boyfriend or something! What the bloody hell was I supposed to do?! If she wanted bloody loyalty and affection, she shouldn't have dated a Slytherin and should have gone for a bloody *Hufflepuff*!" He hissed in defense, looking indignant.

Draco raised a single eyebrow, laughing lightly at the mere memory of the scene they had witnessed the previous year. "You didn't have to publicly call her a dog, you know. Then you went off with some

other Ravenclaw third year right in front of her? Mate, that was really horrible.” He said, sighing exaggeratedly.

Harry sighed too but in exasperation, running a furious hand through his hair and giving his best friend an incredulous stare. “I’m not saying it wasn’t the right thing to do, of course. I’m just saying it was horrible.” Draco said grimly, surprising Harry even more when he was actually looking disapproving.

Harry was about to say something sarcastic in response about Draco scolding him when Draco suddenly spoke up again, breaking his train of thought. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.” Draco suddenly said, his disapproving glare breaking out into the well-known Malfoy smirk.

Harry instantly forgot what he was going to say and laughed out loud, making his sister tense up in his arms and shift around again. Harry covered his mouth to muffle his laughter and waited until AJ had fallen back asleep before speaking again.

“I thought for a minute the great Draco Malfoy was going ‘*Gryffindor*’ on me” Harry kidded, shaking his head. Draco looked disgusted for a brief second but then grinned, shaking his head.

“Of course my favorite part was when Brown starts to scream and cuss at you and walks up to the Slytherin table to dump her pumpkin juice all over your pants.” Draco said, desperately trying to muffle his hysterical laughter.

Harry didn’t look amused at all, reacting by raising his middle finger up at his best friend, who laughed harder, rolling around on the bed. “Shut the bloody hell up! That wasn’t funny! It bloody ticked me off! See if she gets any more of me again!” He said indignantly, narrowing his eyes.

“Whatever Potter... Anyway, that’s not all I want to know. I’m just curious... Don’t think I’ve noticed your looks as well, do you have a thing for Granger?” He asked suddenly, looking suspicious.

Harry tensed up instantly, his emerald eyes flashing in anger. “The *mudblood*?! Of course not, Malfoy! Are you bloody crazy? What in

Merlin's name makes you think that?" He said a little too quickly, not meeting Draco's eyes.

Draco didn't look convinced as he looked sharply at his best friend almost as if he could pierce through his soul and see through his mind. "Well then, why is it that you've taken such a liking to paying her a lot of extra attention? You also defended her that one time in second year plus you and her seemed to have shared a lot of meaningful bloody looks and idle chit-chats last year! What's up Harry?" He asked suspiciously, eyes narrowed in doubt.

Harry suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable, trying to distract himself by playing with his sister's hair once again. "N-nothing, Draco! I just like pissing her off, that's all! She seems to be the only one who can come up with intelligent comebacks anyway. She's just so amusing when she gets ticked off at me." He countered easily.

Draco still looked a bit suspicious as he raised a delicate eyebrow in response. "Do you have a crush on her Harry? Do actually you find that...*Gryffindor* attractive?" He challenged as though not daring to believe it.

Harry's face darkened immediately and Draco knew he had said the wrong thing when he saw the unmistakable fury in Harry's eyes, causing him to flinch inwardly.

"No! Of course not! Why the *hell* would I have a crush on a *mudblood*?! I have all that I ever need and there are girls that are just willing to be my girlfriend if I asked them to! I don't need a bushy-haired, good-for-nothing mudblood like Granger! I'm much too good for her!" He spat out, burning an angry red.

Draco didn't react, keeping his face calm and neutral as he lay back down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling silently. "I hope you're right about that Harry. Gryffindors like Granger are nothing but trouble and disaster. They can rip your pride apart and tear it to shreds with their moral values and virtues...Trust me. It won't do you good at all." He warned.

Harry glared at him angrily. "Are you threatening me, Draco?! You telling me what the heck I should do?!" He dared. Draco just shook his head, giving him another blank stare.

"No. I'm just giving you advice as your best friend Harry. Slytherin-Gryffindor attractions would cause a lot of trouble in our house. I'm just concerned. Lavender Brown was bad enough but know-it-all Granger?" He said in disbelief, sneering.

Harry relaxed slightly but his face still showed a few signs of anger.

"Well don't be. I certainly do *not* have any feelings for that big-haired mudblood and I never will. I can take care of myself anyway Draco but thanks for the concern. As for our housemates, I don't give a fuck about them. Nobody tells me what I should do." He said steadily.

Draco nodded silently, acknowledging his best friend's dominance for a minute before his eyes lit up in what only Harry recognized as an '*I-have-a-bloody-good-idea*' look, causing Harry to narrow his eyes at him questioningly.

"Hey, Potter, didn't you say you needed more challenge and amusement in your love life right now? How about I choose the girl you after next?" He asked, an evil sneer of his face.

Harry raised an eyebrow, his facial features returning back to normal as he anticipated the look on his best friend's face, almost eager as he was to find out what he had in mind.

"That depends Draco... What's in it for me? I don't do personal requests for nothing you know." Harry replied coolly, casually examining his fingernails arrogantly. Draco smirked at him for a minute, looking like he was deep in thought before he shrugged and smiled slightly.

"I'll buy you that new broomstick servicing kit you wanted at Diagon Alley." He offered. Harry shook his head, dissatisfied with the prize he would get even if that Broomstick servicing kit was pretty expensive.

"That's all? Malfoy, give me a strong incentive why I should go after this chick you're about to choose for me..." He said flatly, chuckling.

Draco rolled his eyes indignantly. "Fine, Potter! Then I'll have my mother buy you a whole new set of expensive dress robes." He added.

Harry grinned impishly, obviously pleased with the results. "What's the dare, then?" He asked almost cheerfully, the grin on his handsome face growing. Draco sneered back, his eyes glinting maliciously.

"If you're sure that you feel nothing at all for Granger...Then I dare you to seduce the little know-it-all." He said daringly, watching as something flickered in Harry's eyes. Harry's jaw dropped down instantly, his eyes widening in shock, indignation, disgust and horror all at the same time.

"*Granger?! You want me to go after Granger?! Hermione Granger?!*" He asked incredulously, his voice cracking slightly. "Why not? You've done that whole seduction scheme numerous times before... But this time, you have to make her fall madly, head-over-heels in love with you. That would be worth the humiliation wouldn't it?" Draco said, laughing loudly.

Harry just looked at him as if he was mad, clearly not liking the idea that he would have to seduce and bed *Granger* of all people... The girl hated his guts... He wasn't so confident about himself now but he sure is hell not going to let Draco know that.

Draco seemed to sense his hesitation, his sneer growing as he stared at him in challenge again. "Scared, Potter? This is your chance to prove yourself that you do not feel anything for the mudblood... And after you dump her, you'd be as sick with her as with those other girls...But remember, this is a dangerous dare... In this dare, you can either prove that you're not weak at all or...You could end up getting much more than you bargained for. She's a *Gryffindor*, after all. Dangerous grounds." Draco drawled slowly but carefully, his eyes narrowed darkly at Harry.

Harry just glared back, mirroring the evil smirk on Draco's face with his own as he thought of the oh-so-tempting humiliation he could inflict upon Granger and the rest of her good-for-nothing friends.



“That’s it? Hate to say it Malfoy, but you certainly do make up the best schemes... Imagine what this would do for my reputation... Getting the future head girl of Hogwarts... Responsible, level-headed, goody-two-shoes Granger... The *perfect* model of the *perfect* student... Humiliated and rejected by her evil, heartless Slytherin enemy... She’ll be my greatest victory. ” He murmured almost dreamily, the smirk still evident on his features.

Draco let a sinister smile spread across his face as he promptly recognized his best friend’s Slytherin instincts working already inside his head, feeling a rush of pride for a moment before adding,

“Well... You up for it Potter? Or are you too Hufflepuff to try going for your enemy.” He added. Harry shook his head in disbelief, an amused smile on his face as he looked amazed at Draco’s ingenious way of thinking.

Draco looked triumphant, cocking an eyebrow in question. “Is that a no?” He asked, sniggering. Harry’s smile instantly turned into a scowl as he glowered at him.

“I never back down from a good challenge. I always get *what* and *who* I want, no matter what the cost is... I *never* fail... So, you’ve got yourself a bet, Malfoy.” He said, flashing him his trademark smirk. Draco snorted derisively, amused at Harry’s overflowing confidence.

“We’ll see if you’re good enough to seduce even little-ms-goody-two-shoes Granger.” He said in disbelief. “Wait a minute, this doesn’t prohibit me from still being with other girls now does it?” Harry asked suddenly, his features creasing in worry.

Draco laughed and shook his head. “Nope. I’m not giving you a time limit either. That’s how sure I am that you can’t do it.” He said confidently. Harry narrowed his eyes.

“Fine. As I said Malfoy, you’re on.” He said boldly, holding out his hand. Draco had to stand up and walk over to Harry’s bed to shake it but a triumphant look had spread across his face.

“Oh, and one more thing. I forgot to mention *my* terms, Harry... If I win and you fail, you buy *me* what *I* just promised you *and* you have

to be Millicent Bulstrode's loyal, lovesick boyfriend for a whole day... Nothing worse than that..." He added again, laughing at Harry's horrified face.

"Harumph!! Would you two shut the hell up?! I'm trying to sleep, dammit!" AJ suddenly snapped irritably, yanking the blanket over her head. Draco and Harry shut up immediately but smirked at each other in challenge.

Draco just grinned slyly again before he yawned and checked his watch. "Well, we have around 2 more hours before we head off to the Quidditch match. I'm going to take a bloody nap. Try not to wank off in your sleep, okay Potter?" He taunted lightly, turning his lamp and laying back down the bed.

Harry growled and hurled the nearest object within his reach, his boot, at Draco's head. "Ouch, damn! That bloody hurt!" Draco exclaimed in the darkness. Harry just sniggered quietly and drifted off into a light sleep, snuggling down beside his twin.

Earlier that same day, Ronald Weasley was rummaging around through his trunk, looking for an assortment of muggle clothing while his best friend, Seamus Finnegan, sat on his bed, watching him in amusement.

"Around what time are we going to pick up Hermione again, mate?" Seamus asked through a mouthful of apple.

"Around lunchtime, I reckon. I think mum's taking us to Diagon Alley first. She's going to be picking up a few things first so we can stay around there for a while." Ron replied, pulling on a pair of blue jeans and a baggy gray sweatshirt.

"You think this would do, Seamus?" He asked Seamus, showing him his outfit warily. Seamus laughed, shrugging nonchalantly. "You won't win any beauty contests but it'll do, Romeo. Come on, let's get going. I'm bored stiff here." He said as he hopped off the bed and raced out of the room.

Ron marveled at his best friend's energy and followed him out of the room, a grin on his face. Seamus sat waiting for him out in their living

room, fidgeting around impatiently. The rest of Ron's family was still in the kitchen eating breakfast so the two boys sat down in the living room and started a game of Wizard's chess.

"I'm all psyched up for that Quidditch match later! I can't wait for Ireland to kick Bulgaria's butt! They're my favorite team! How did your dad manage to get such great seats Ron?" Seamus asked him as he took his turn and took one of Ron's knight pawns.

Ron grinned at him as he took one of Seamus' bishops. "I think Ludo Bagman helped him. Imagine, we'll be sitting at the Top Box! We'll be able to see everything from up there!" He exclaimed excitedly.

Seamus looked impressed, his jaw hanging open stupidly. "I'll say... I'm looking forward to buying some souvenirs too. I hear they're selling some of those magical figures of something." He said, taking another bite of his apple.

"Yeah... Maybe I'll buy one for Hermione too..." Ron said thoughtfully, unknowingly taking one of Seamus' knight pawns. Seamus smirked as Ron looked as though he had snapped out of thought, scowling back at Seamus in question.

"I'm sure you will, Ronnie-boy." Seamus teased, sniggering. Ron flushed at the ridiculous nickname, growling threateningly at Seamus. "Shut up Seamus! I don't know what you mean." Ron snapped angrily, narrowing his eyes at him.

"Aw come on, Ronnie boy! Everyone knows you have a thing for Hermione. It's so obvious in the way you two always argue with each other." Seamus pointed out, now taking Ron's bishop.

"I do *not* fancy Hermione like *that*, okay?! She's like my bloody *sister*, for Merlin's sake! Does arguing a lot necessarily mean fancying each other?!" Ron said. "Okay, whatever Ron." Seamus answered lightly, obviously unconvinced.

"Aw give me a break, Seamus! Next thing you know, you'll be telling me I like AJ Potter because I fight with her all the bloody time!" Ron said, laughing. Seamus' eyes widened in alarm, shock and mirth, gaping at Ron like he had suddenly grown three heads.

“Do you?!” He asked in shock, his voice as easily as high as a house-elf’s. Ron’s eyes widened too, as he realized what Seamus was implying. “N-no!! Seamus, no!! Absolutely *not*! She’s as annoying and as self-centered as her brother is!” Ron denied hastily.

Seamus started laughing out loud. “Bloody *hell*, Ron! No wonder you liked to argue with her so much! I can just see the sparks flying! Mortal enemies huh?! I think *not*!” He teased, laughing.

Ron hurled a chess piece at his head. “I do *not* like AJ, okay?! She’s a nasty, stuck-up Slytherin brat! Just drop it!” He yelled.

“Man, I never knew you would have a thing for your enemy’s twin! *Merlin*! AJ pretty-face Potter, the princess of Slytherin! Hey, maybe you should hook up with her and see what happens!” Seamus kidded.

“Seamus!! Shut the *hell* up!” Ron yelled again, aiming another chess piece at his head which Seamus easily avoided, still laughing. “Ay, don’t worry about it mate. Nothing to be ashamed of really. AJ’s one fine girl if I do say so myself... Got that whole *I’m-beautiful-but-hard-to-get* aura around her. Great stems too... Kinda have a thing for her myself.” Seamus said, winking at him.

“Aghh!! Seamus!!” Ron shouted, furiously pounding his fist against the table. “Ah, so I take it you do like Hermione then, is that right?” Seamus persisted again, laughing uncontrollably at Ron’s frustration.

Ron growled at him, his hands tightening into fists. “No! Seamus... I am warning you...”

“Or maybe you have a thing for that Parkinson chick. What is it with you and Slytherins gals?”

“**SEAMUS!!**”

**A/N:** Harry has a new preposition... Do you think Hermione’s strong enough to resist our little sexy, green-eyed Slytherin? And who does Ron really like? Don’t worry, this story actually has a plot and it’s coming up in the future chapters. Still kinda the same as the Goblet of Fire except I’ve made a lot of “modifications” to fit the whole Harry

being in Slytherin thing. Anyway, hope you liked the chapter.  
**REVIEW, REVIEW, REVIEW!**

## Chapter 5- Unexpected Encounters

"Where are we seated, Draco?" AJ asked as she followed him and Harry through a gigantic stadium with massive gold walls. "The top box." Draco answered, smirking proudly at her, looking very pleased with himself as AJ had rolled her eyes in response.

Harry stared around the stadium in awe, marveling on how huge it was as his jaw hung open loosely in shock. *This is one bloody hell of a stadium...* He thought, whistling slightly. Narcissa walked ahead in front of them, meeting up with a wizard Harry, Draco and AJ recognized seeing in their third year as *Cornelius Fudge*, the Minister of Magic himself.

"Ah, Narcissa. So good to see you here, my dear. But...Where is Lucius?" Cornelius greeted warmly, the Bulgarian Minister of Magic next to him looking at them in confusion. Harry rolled his eyes to himself, obviously not impressed by meeting the minister of magic.

Narcissa smiled and offered him her hand, which he took and kissed as a gesture of respect, giving the beautiful woman a sincere smile. "Good day to you, dear minister. Unfortunately, my husband couldn't make it. I believe he had other arrangements to deal with but I brought with me my son Draco." Narcissa said, putting a delicate arm around her son.

Draco shook the minister's hand slightly, giving him his practiced, fake smile of respect which Harry recognized from having seen Draco use it so many times before. "A pleasure to meet you, minister." Draco said in a forced, warm tone, making Harry hide a smile at his unbecoming, respectful behavior.

"Well, he does seem to take after Lucius, doesn't he?" Fudge said, chuckling. Narcissa and Draco both forced out the fake laugh they used when conversing with aristocratic wizards. Harry, who stood behind Draco with a smirk, nudged AJ lightly.

"I wonder why." He whispered sarcastically, causing his twin to nudge him back sharply and mask her laugh with a slight cough. Draco bit his lip to keep from laughing when he heard this, secretly giving the twins a mock glare which they returned with a smirk.

"And these are?" Fudge asked, looking at Harry and AJ. Narcissa was about to answer when his eyes widened at the sight of their scars on their foreheads. "*The Potter twins?! Well, what do you know! So good to see you two again!*" Fudge exclaimed, walking over and vigorously shaking Harry's hand.

Harry forced out a fake smile similar to that of Draco's earlier. "Nice to see you again too, Mr. Fudge." He said, grimacing slightly. Fudge then grabbed AJ's hand and shook it the same way he did Harry's, a big grin on his face.

"Why, Narcissa, why didn't you tell me that your son was friends with the Potter twins? Are you three close?" Fudge asked, peering at the three Slytherins curiously. Narcissa quirked her lips in a small smile, answering for them before they had the chance.

"My son and AJ here are quite close friends minister but I believe Draco and Harry here have been best friends for three years now." She said, smiling as Draco flashed Harry a grin, which he easily returned, nodding.

"It must have slipped my mind to tell you though, minister." She added, shrugging elegantly as she spoke. Fudge nodded eagerly and turned to the Bulgarian minister of magic.

"These are the *Potter twins*. Do you know them?" He asked very slowly, pronouncing each word carefully with his mouth. The Bulgarian minister just looked back at him with a blank look, obviously not understanding what he was saying.

Fudge sighed, shaking his head. "Well, anyway, it was a pleasure meeting up with you again, Narcissa. Please inform Lucius that I send my regards." Fudge said, giving them all another smile and nodding before he made his way up to his seat at the top box, the Bulgarian minister following after him.

"Come along children. We mustn't stand here in the corridor." Narcissa said as she handed a nearby ministry witch by the stairs four tickets. The witch smiled at them. "Top box! You folks head on up!" She exclaimed as she checked their tickets.

"This is going to be great!" AJ exclaimed as she sat down in her seat the right side of Harry, who had Draco at his left side. Draco was seated next to his mother while his mother conversed with several other rich-looking wizards they didn't know.

"Hey, can I borrow the program, Draco?" Harry asked, pulling out his Omnioculars from the robes the trio had changed into before the match. Draco handed him a program, scanning the small crowd of wizards and witches who were seating themselves in the top box.

"See anyone familiar, Draco?" Harry asked casually, scanning the program lazily. Draco, however, wasn't listening since he was too busy smirking and glaring at the group of people who had just walked inside the top box.

Only mildly interested, Harry and AJ both turned around and saw Arthur Weasley, Ron Weasley's father, talking to Fudge, all his children standing behind him along with two other familiar teenagers.

Recognizing who they were, Harry automatically felt his face moving to form his infamous smirk, feeling a sudden urge to yell out an insult out of old habit.

*Well, what do you know...* He thought as he eyed them up and down haughtily. "Well look at what we have here, Draco... The *Weasel*, the *Mudblood* and the Little Irish *Leprechaun*... Never thought we'd see you three losers here." Harry said snidely, keeping his voice low enough to prevent Ron's father or siblings to hear them.

Ron's ears turned red and Seamus narrowed his eyes in anger, both boys not wanting to do anything irrational in front of Ron's father. Hermione just tensed up upon seeing Harry but didn't say anything just as Harry transformed his smirk into a charming smile before her, his smile obviously not reaching his cold eyes.

"Yeah... How many of your belongings did your father have to sell to afford to sit here, Weasel?" Draco taunted under his breath so that Ron's father couldn't hear him, raising an eyebrow.

Narcissa wasn't paying attention to what her son was saying but she was eyeing Hermione with obvious distaste on her face, wrinkling her



nose in dislike. Hermione burned pink in humiliation but held her head up high, her coffee brown eyes flashing.

“You had better watch what you say you good-for-nothing, smarmy bastards!” Seamus hissed at them. Draco and Harry exchanged mock scared, shock looks. “Language Finnegan... And I thought you Gryffindors had high morals...Tut-tut.” Draco remarked, shaking his head.

Ron made a move to step forward but Hermione put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. AJ immediately tensed up as she glared at the hand Hermione had on Ron’s shoulder.

Up until now, she had decided not to join Harry and Draco in mercilessly taunting the three Gryffindors but somehow, she suddenly felt a strong surge of rage towards her Gryffindor rival.

*Why that good-for-nothing bitch... It’s not enough she has to beat me in every single damn subject and take away my pride but she— I ought to...* AJ grumbled to herself.

“Don’t listen to these slimy pricks, guys. They’re unintelligible remarks are not worth wasting our time over.” Hermione said sharply to them, making sure Draco’s mother couldn’t hear her.

“Really Granger? Aw, what’s wrong? Don’t you want to send your little bulldogs on us? You won’t have to worry, it’s not like Harry or Draco here would cause anymore damage on them since they pretty well look like they’ve been bulldozed anyway.” AJ retorted, narrowing her eyes at her enemy and inwardly surprised at what she had said.

Draco and Harry both cracked up, sniggering behind their hands while Hermione narrowed her eyes in anger. AJ shot her a sweet, innocent smile that would have made even Prof. Snape melt in forgiveness but Hermione knew it was just another act.

Ron looked like he was about say something back when Fudge suddenly walked over to them. “Ah, chatting with your friends?” He asked Ron warmly, not noticing the way the three Gryffindors had tensed up while the Slytherins had smirked at the idea.

Mr. Weasley walked over to Fudge just as he introduced him to Narcissa, both adults oblivious to the children around them. "I believe you already met Narcissa Malfoy, Arthur." Fudge said cheerfully, never seeing the spiteful exchange of hisses and glares behind his back.

Harry sneered evilly and flashed his middle finger at Ron, causing the redhead to attempt lunging at Harry if Seamus hadn't held him back. Harry laughed wickedly raising his eyebrow at Hermione but she scowled at him and looked away hastily.

Narcissa bit back a chuckle when she saw this over Arthur's shoulder, trying hard not to let the two men notice what was going on.

"Yes. I believe we have... Erm, gotten *acquainted* before." Narcissa said slowly, merely raising an eyebrow before turning to look back at the match. Arthur sighed in defeat and nodded to Fudge, an exasperated look on his face.

"Well, we'll be taking our seats now, minister. Thank you." He said, nodding as he led his children to a row of seats far away from the Slytherins. "Forget them Ron. They don't matter anyway." Harry heard Hermione tell Ron as they walked away.

Draco nudged him. "You didn't exactly earn yourself some points with Granger, there. You scared yet, Harry?" He commented, smiling slyly at him. Harry snorted in disbelief, merely raising an eyebrow for a brief minute in response, rolling his eyes.

"I'll work on it Draco. I wasn't exactly thinking of pulling anything with her little bulldogs next to her." He retorted derisively. Draco just grinned knowingly and turned away, shaking his head in both doubt and amusement.

Harry turned around in his seat and stared at Hermione intently, his emerald eyes glazing over at his own will. She was scanning her own program while Ron and Seamus conversed with this weird looking house-elf beside them who seemed to have been staring at the Slytherin trio in keen interest and curiosity.

Harry barely noticed as he stared at Hermione steadily, willing her to look up and meet his eyes. *Look at me, Granger...* Harry commanded her silently, his eyes burning with intensity and force.

As though she had heard his silent message, she looked up and met his eyes, looking dazed. Hermione looked at him with confusion and fear in her coffee-brown eyes as Harry just gazed at her with a predatory look in his eyes, an eyebrow arched in confidence.

Slowly... *Very* slowly... He quirked his lips slightly into a seductive, half-smile and licked his lips enticingly. Hermione gasped in shock and horror, instantly feeling a warm blush tingle her cheeks as she hastily looked away, accidentally dropping her program on the floor.

Harry watched in satisfaction as she shakily grabbed it and looked at anything but him, still blushing furiously but with a determined scowl on her face. Harry chuckled sexily to himself and turned back to watch the Quidditch field, pleased with the obvious attraction Granger had for him and the effect he had on the Gryffindor girl.

*This ought to be a lot of fun... I might even enjoy Draco's little dare for once...* He thought, smirking. He wasn't even listening as AJ and Draco started up their usual arguments in front of him about the upcoming mascots, both of them looking as though they wanted to strangle the other.

Then, raising both eyebrows in surprise, Harry sat up as he saw a big group of extremely beautiful women sauntering into the field, their movements suave and graceful.

Draco sat up instantly, his silver eyes wide with crazed admiration and lust as his jaw dropped open all the way down to the floor. "Veela! My god, they're Veela!!" He exclaimed, grinning as he hurriedly pushed the omnioculars to his eyes.

AJ raised an eyebrow, recognizing indeed Veela women sashaying onto the field as Draco and her twin brother both seemed to stiffen beside her, their breathing ragged and irregular.

“*Veela*? They’re absolutely my favorite magical creature! I’ve read a lot about them... Aren’t they those creatures that can attract men’s—”

She stopped when she realized that both boys were no longer listening to her but instead, were staring open-mouthed as the *Veela* on the field started to dance. Both Slytherin boys watched, transfixed and practically drooling with unhidden lust and desire for the *Veela* up front.

AJ smirked as Draco and Harry both stood up abruptly and looked as though they were going to jump from the top box into the field. She leaned back into her seat and giggled, enjoying the rare sight of seeing Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy be the ones who were drooling rather than be the ones drooled for.

Frankly, she enjoyed seeing this and she didn’t mind seeing these two making complete fools out of themselves. Narcissa caught her eye from beside Draco and they both smiled at each other in amusement.

The music suddenly stopped and the *Veela* stopped dancing, causing a lot of angry yells to fill the stadium. Harry and Draco both blinked as if they had just woken up and looked around in confusion.

“What the hell just happened?” Harry asked stupidly, scratching his head and looking dazed. AJ’s smirk grew wider, her emerald eyes twinkling in humor and suppressed laughter.

“The two of you looked as though you were going to jump into the field and do those *Veelas* right then and there.” She mocked snidely, sniggering. “Huh?” Draco asked, both him and Harry sitting back down in confusion and bewilderment.

“Bulgaria’s mascots are *Veela* dear. Those creatures have a special ability of entrancing men.” Narcissa explained calmly, a slight smile on his face.

AJ giggled again as Draco blushed dark red and mumbled something, looking away in embarrassment while Harry just narrowed his eyes in utmost annoyance. “Not a word, AJ. You tell anyone this and you’re dead...” He warned, looking extremely pissed off.

"Y-you should have s-seen your faces! You looked as though you wanted to dive down from the Top Box onto the field!" AJ burst out, giggling again, this time, much harder, much to the Slytherin duo's annoyance.

Harry silenced her with a single glare, narrowing his eyes again as he stared at the field. The Veela were walking out now and Harry couldn't help but scowl at them angrily. He had almost made a fool out of himself because of their damn abilities.

He wasn't the type to be taken in easily, even if they were Veela. Beside him, Draco cursed under his breath in humiliation. "I swear, that was really humiliating, Harry. Veela or not..." He mumbled darkly.

AJ started to giggle again, trying to smother it behind her hand but Harry and Draco heard it and leveled her with their trademark glares but instead of intimidating the girl like it usually did other people, she only started laughing harder.

*Great...* Harry thought irritably as he glared at the Leprechauns walking into the field.

"*Honestly!*" Hermione said, shaking her head in disapproval as she pulled Ron back to make him sit down. Ron grinned sheepishly, scratching his head. "Ay... Those women were really hot babes, wouldn't you say? Break me off a piece of them!" Seamus exclaimed, looking at the Veela walking out of the field.

Mr. Weasley leaned over with a smile on his face to say something to them when he had heard their conversation. "I wouldn't say that if I were you Seamus. Just wait till you see them in their real form." He said, chuckling.

Seamus shrugged nonchalantly as Ron turned to look at the Slytherin trio earlier, fusing his eyebrows together. AJ was currently giggling uncontrollably to herself while Potter and Malfoy were glaring at the field sullenly, looking incredibly annoyed.

*Wonder what's so funny...* Ron thought idly, shrugging and before turning to look at the field. The three of them had been chatting with

this house-elf named Winky for the past half hour before the Veela had walked onto the field and had started dancing.

Seamus and Ron had immediately began drooling and gazing at the Veela dreamily while Hermione had just raised an eyebrow in disapproval at them. "Hey! Look!" Ron exclaimed as the Irish leprechauns began flying over them, dropping some gold coins above their heads. Hermione watched the crowd rummage around and shove each other to retrieve most of the gold coins.

She shot a look over at Harry and was surprised to see all three Slytherins calmly watching the leprechauns, not bothering to pick up any of the gold coins they were giving away. Harry caught her eye and gave her a questioning smirk. Hermione flushed and turned away quickly.

Beside her, Ron and Seamus were hurriedly stuffing their pockets with gold coins, laughing at each other.

She shook her head at their immaturity and waited as Ludo Bagman's voice boomed throughout the whole stadium. He began shouting out the players' name on each team, the crowd screaming their support after each one.

When all the players of each team had been called, Hermione couldn't help but notice the one player that had been introduced as "*Victor Krum*".

He was thin and tall, with a large nose and thick black eyebrows. He, however, looked like he was a natural flier as he glided easily through the air almost as though he was weightless.

*He's amazing... He's probably as good as Potter is...Hopefully 'better'...* She thought to herself, marveling at his grace and his agility in the air. Hermione raised both eyebrows, impressed as Ron and Seamus yelled out their support for Ireland beside her.

Using a pair of Omnioculars, Hermione saw the name "**Firebolt**", the same broom Potter had received during their third year, on each of their brooms as they sped by them. Hermione watched as the

players sped around so fast that they looked like a bunch of blurs zooming around that Bagman only had time to say their last names.

As soon as Bulgaria made their first point, the Veela started to dance again but Ron and Seamus had both covered their ears furiously and had focused intently on the match. As the game progressed, Ireland began leading while the Ireland fans screamed their support.

Several minutes later, Hermione gasped when both seekers, Ireland's Lynch and Bulgaria's Krum, dived down, plummeting to the ground with incredible speed. "They're going to crash!" Ron yelled.

And he was half right as Krum pulled out of the dive the last minute just Lynch crashed violently to the ground. The Ireland fans groaned out loudly in disappointment but within a few minutes, the medics had helped Lynch up and he had zoomed back up into the air, looking around for the snitch again.

Hermione eventually tuned out in boredom, yawning loudly and watching the scene lazily, her mind drifting somewhere else.

Quidditch has never really been one of her favorite pastimes as Ron or Seamus so instead she settled on scanning the top box, curious to see who else was there with them. Her gaze fell on Potter once again and she saw him staring intently at the match, his eyebrows scrunched up in concentration, an intense absorption in his eyes.

AJ yawned beside him and rested her head on her brother's shoulder, watching the match in similar boredom to that of Hermione's. Malfoy was watching the match with a blank face, a quick occasional smirk on his lips whenever Bulgaria would score or commit a foul against Ireland.

Hermione tensed when AJ looked up and caught eyes with Hermione, her face immediately twisting into a vengeful snarl. Hermione's eyes widened when she realized how those eyes were so much similar to that of Harry's, causing AJ to narrow her eyes and give her a confused but mocking sneer.

Refusing to be intimidated by someone who got lower marks than she did, Hermione just regarded her with a cold, smug look before she

looked back at the field in time to see Viktor Krum clutching the snitch tightly in his fist and the crowd going wild with cheers.

"What happened? Who won? What's the score?" Hermione asked Ron hastily as he jumped up and cheered along with everyone else.

"Ay! Ireland won, Mione! Krum got the snitch but Ireland still won!" Seamus answered for her, cheering loudly, ecstatic joy clearly shown on his face. "That was incredible!" Ron exclaimed, clapping loudly and cheering his support for the winning team.

Hermione grinned and clapped along with everyone else, satisfied with the results of the match. *Pity I hadn't paid much attention around the end of the match though... Oh well...* She thought, shrugging it off instantly. She got up, along with everybody else and began to walk out of the top box after Ron. She seriously needed to get some well-needed sleep.

"Draco! Harry! Get up, both of you, this instant!!" A panic-filled voice jolted an annoyed Harry awake from his dream later that night.

He had dreaming about him doing the Wronski Defensive Faint perfectly when he was suddenly jostled awake inside their room three hours after the match in their miniature mansion.

He sat up immediately looked around, rubbing his eyes to clear his slightly blurred vision. In the bed next to him, Draco grumbled and grabbed his wand, looking around him with half-lidded silver eyes.

"*Lumos*." He muttered, searching around the room with his wand. He was startled when he saw his mother huddled over him, dressed in her wizard's robes and looking pale as though she had seen a ghost.

"Mother, what's wrong? Why are you dressed up in the middle of the night?" Draco asked sleepily. They heard an explosion outside and several people screamed loudly, finally managing to wake the two Slytherin boys up as Draco and Harry both jumped out of their beds immediately and looked around.

"What the hell was that, mother?" Draco asked sharply, his eyes now fully awake and wide, filled with panic.



“Hurry children! The death eaters are outside and they are chasing the muggles around. It isn’t safe here, go and hide in the forest! I must go search for your father.” Narcissa told them worriedly as Harry gathered his sleeping twin in his arms.

Draco set his wand down on a table and grabbed his wizard’s robes, throwing them over his pajamas while Harry did the same. “Please be careful mother. You don’t want you-know-who getting suspicious of us.” Draco pleaded.

Narcissa gave him a small, reassuring smile before she grabbed her wand and ran out of the house, slamming the door behind her. Harry spoke for the first time since he had woken up, his eyes glinting in suspicion and resentment.

“Draco? What the bloody hell are death eaters?” He asked sharply as he covered his sleeping twin with her own robe, throwing it over her sheer nightgown. Draco exhaled nervously, grabbing his wand from the table and hurriedly fixing his robe as they made their way out.

“Oh damn! I keep forgetting how little you know, Harry. Come on, I’ll explain it to you on the way.” He said as the two of them ran out of the house, AJ in Harry’s arms.

The two Slytherins ran out amidst all the muggles running and screaming around being chased by wizards in black robes and black masks. “Well? What the hell are death eaters?!” Harry demanded impatiently, trying to calm his shock as his face glowed pale with fear at the sight around them.

“The death eaters are you-know-who’s league of followers, Harry. They’re like his army of wizards or something. Some of them are already in Azkaban prison or dead but the whole lot of them are still loose and are just waiting for you-know-who’s return.” Draco started, looking nervous at Harry’s hateful expression.

“Trust me, you don’t want to meet up with one, especially if they find out you two are the Potter twins. They’re dark wizards. *Purely dark, evil* wizards who are more than willing to lick you-know-who’s shoes.” Draco told him as they made their way to the forest.

“And your father is one of them?!” Harry asked spitefully as they stopped at a clearing behind a bunch of tall trees to catch their breaths. Draco paled visibly, if that was possible, his eyes widening at the anger and betrayal he recognized in his best friend’s voice.

“Harry, you should know that he *was* one but he—”

“Then how the bloody *fuck* do I know you’re not leading me somewhere where they might capture us?!” Harry rounded on him, his eyes blazing in suspicion and rage. Draco glared at him in shock, his own eyes flashing in indignation and insult.

“What the hell do you think of me, Potter?! I may be a bastard but I am no death eater and neither is my father!” He protested heatedly. Harry merely glared at him in suspicion and accusation, a harsh, mockingly disbelieving sneer on his face.

Draco’s eyes widened at his expression, backing away slightly, taken back. “Harry, I’m your best friend, dammit! How the fuck can you accuse me of something like that?! I may not be the most honorable person there is but my *loyalty* is something you should never mock in front of me!” Draco yelled furiously at him, his silver eyes blazing with anger and rage.

“Well, obviously, I don’t know who to trust now anymore, do I?!” Harry yelled out at him, gently putting AJ down under a tree before he walked up to his so-called best friend, both of them facing each other.

Draco’s eyes clouded over darkly, his face twisting into a frown. “You can trust me. Remember what I told you Harry, a Malfoy never betrays his allies and I know for a fact that neither do Potters. We are loyal to our words until death and I promise, me and my family are not as evil as everyone believes us to be.” He explained slowly.

Harry narrowed his eyes, not convinced as he tensed uncomfortably, not knowing how he should react. “How the hell would I know that, Draco? Hell, how the *fuck* do I know you aren’t setting me up right now?! Huh?!” Harry demanded furiously, shoving Draco roughly.

Draco stumbled against a tree before he narrowed his eyes and shoved Harry back in retaliation. “Don’t you fuck with me, Harry! Just

hear me out! You have no damn right to assume things about me! Never assume things about me!" He shouted angrily.

Harry lost his balance when Draco shoved him and fell back into someone. He turned around, his eyes widening.

A wizard in black robes and a black mask on his face caught Harry from behind and steadied him with strong hands. Harry was about to exclaim something when the wizard leveled both him and Draco with a glare.

"Not a word. We don't want anyone to hear us, now do we?" He warned in a scarily calm and smooth tone, pulling off his mask. Harry stiffened as he found himself staring into the face of none other than Lucius Malfoy.

Instantly, he felt a strong surge of anger and betrayal rage through him again and before he knew what he was doing, he shoved Draco roughly again.

"No, Harry, you don't understand! My father's a—"

"You fucking bastard! I never should have trusted you!!" Harry accused loudly, glaring at Draco in absolute hatred and shoving him for the third time, this time much harder. Draco stumbled on the tree again and winced in pain. Harry was about to punch him when Lucius grabbed his arm.

"Potter, you don't want to do that. Trust me. Listen to my son first." Lucius said calmly once again, helping his son get up. "Why should I?" Harry countered bitterly, the disgust and revulsion he felt for the older Malfoy obvious in his tone of voice.

"Because, it's as though you have a choice here, now do you?" Lucius returned stridently with a sneer on his face. "Why you—" Harry was seething with anger but he looked at Draco coldly, a tense, unfriendly silence suddenly coming down on them.

Draco took a shaky breath before he began talking. "Harry... I'll admit, my father was a death eater but only up until the end of our second

year. He has switched sides, Harry..." Draco said slowly, grimacing in pain.

Harry's eyes widened as he walked over and stood protectively in front of his sister, who was still asleep despite all the noise they had been making. "I don't believe you..." He said coldly, though his eyes suddenly flickered with doubt and hope.

"Well, believe it you stupid git! He is now working as a spy for Dumbledore. You can ask the Headmaster himself. He only has to act the way he does to keep you-know-who from getting suspicious." Draco continued, his eyes pleading Harry to trust him.

Lucius put a hand on Harry's shoulder and looked at him intently, surprising the younger boy immensely when he saw the same sincerity in his eyes as his son's.

"He's telling the truth, Potter. I know it may be difficult for you to trust me after what I did in your second year but I can assure you that I have changed sides for the better now. I promise, you can trust me. *Us.*" He said softly.

Harry searched his eyes with his penetrating, intense gaze, knowing full well that someone belonging to a family such as the Malfoys wouldn't dare tell a lie directly to his face. "You've got to believe us, Harry. We want to help protect you both." Draco said, sighing heavily.

After a long moment of tense, dark silence, Harry nodded slowly and managed to give a tiny smirk, shrugging. "What the hell..." He said, extending his hand out to Draco, though a bit reluctantly.

Draco let out the breath he had been holding and gladly took his hand, pulling his best friend into a brotherly hug. "Sorry about that, Malfoy. I got carried away for a second..." Harry said, weakly giving Draco their special handshake.

"Me too, Potter." Draco replied easily, throwing his best friend a grin. "Well, you two have certainly created a lot of noise in here. You had better go to the other side of the forest. There are more people there." Lucius told them in amusement, putting his mask back on and pulling out his wand.

“What about you father?” Draco asked worriedly. Lucius’ eyes flickered for a minute before he shook his head and gave his son a reassuring look.

“I have to go and meet up with your mother, Draco. Then we must meet up with the other death eaters. Try not to go looking for us, okay? Stay with Harry and AJ.” He said as he nodded to both of them and ran out of the forest.

The two stood in silence for a minute before Harry cleared his throat, looking extremely foolish. “Well... I guess I owe you more than one apology, Draco. I kind of feel like a bloody idiot about blowing off at you like I did.” He said.

Draco shook his head, rolling his eyes. “Forget it, Harry. It was completely understandable. Though I wouldn’t mind it if you apologized to me in *public*.” He kidded, sneering.

Harry laughed out loud, returning the sneer easily. “You wish, Malfoy.” He said as he searched for his wand inside his pocket, suddenly tensing in fear and anxiety when he felt nothing but air.

*Fuck...* He thought as he frantically searched his pocket for it, growing more and more agitated by the minute. “What are you looking for, Harry?” Draco asked him curiously, raising an eyebrow.

“My wand! It’s gone! It’s *fucking* gone! We have to find it!” Harry blurted out suddenly, his eyes frantically searching the ground for the said object.

“Hmm? Harry?.. Where the bloody hell are we?” AJ asked suddenly, yawning and standing up. Her eyes widened when she took in their surroundings, feeling a strong surge of fear and dread race through her immediately.

“What the hell?! Why are we here? What the hell is happening outside and what the fuck happened?!” She demanded in panic, her eyes wide. Harry groaned and searched the ground for his wand, muttering under his breath.

“Draco, you explain what happened.” He mumbled, feeling foolish looking around in the dark.

“Where the *hell* are we going, Ron?” Seamus demanded as he followed his best friend through the dark forest, squelching a gasp when he heard another explosion and muggles screaming outside the forest.

“To a clearing... Anywhere, just to get farther away from those death eaters.” He answered as he used his wand to guide them through the dark.

“Are you sure your dad and your brothers are going to be okay, Ron?” Hermione asked him worriedly, thinking about how Mr. Weasley, Percy, Bill and Charlie had rushed off towards the death eaters with their wands to help the muggles out.

“They’ll be fine, Hermione. We just have to worry about our *own* safety, right now.” Ron replied as he led them to a dark clearing. Letting out a breath of relief, he collapsed against a nearby tree and let out a sigh of relief.

“I do hope those muggles are alright. I can’t believe those death eaters are doing this sort of commotion in a crowded place.” Hermione said, wrapping her jacket tighter around herself.

Since they had rushed out of their tent in a hurry, she was still in her rather, sheer nightgown, which she had only covered up with a jacket to keep her warm but she wish she had worn more now since her legs were *freezing*.

“No kidding... I hope dad manages to catch them in the act.” Ron said darkly, a scowl on his face. “Ay, who do you reckon are under those masks?” Seamus asked.

“Well, I’m not sure but maybe—”

“Hey Weasley! Fancy running into you here.” They heard a familiar voice in the darkness call out, interrupting Ron. The redhead jumped in surprise before he used his wand to see who it was and found himself looking at a familiar, sneering face.

AJ Potter raised an eyebrow at him and smugly leaned back against the tree opposite Ron. "Well? Don't you have anything intelligent to say or are you just going to stare at me?" She asked snidely, sniggering when Ron turned red in response.

"Yeah. Why do we always have to run into *you*?!" He snapped. AJ looked quite angry and flushed slightly in the darkness, her eyes narrowing at him indignantly.

"Well, maybe if you'd quit following us around, then maybe—"

"*Us*?!" Hermione interrupted curiously, suddenly feeling her heart race nervously as she dreaded the answer. "Meaning her, Harry and myself, mudblood." Draco answered for her, stepping out of the shadows.

Harry followed after him, his eyes immediately looking at Hermione with an unreadable expression in them Hermione couldn't quite interpret. Hermione felt herself blush in humiliation as Harry's intense emerald orbs eyed her from her face down to her skimpy nightgown, maliciously resting on her long, tan legs.

*Never knew Granger had such fine legs...* Harry thought to himself, letting out another sexy chuckle as he eyed her up and down. *Like it or not, for a mudblood Gryffindor, Granger definitely had one fine body...* He added, smirking lightly. He raised an eyebrow, clearly enjoying the view.

Apparently, Ron noticed this too and a sudden urge to protect his best friend overcame as he stepped forward and met Harry's gaze. "Keep your bloody eyes to yourself, Potter!" He growled viciously at him. Draco hid a smile as Harry just grinned at Ron tauntingly.

"Sorry, Weasel. Couldn't help myself." He said, winking at Hermione. Hermione glared at him, blushing dark red in embarrassment. "Get yourself lost you sick, perverted bastard." She said in disgust, scowling at the Slytherins in front of her.

"Yeah, I'm surprised you're not out there, Malfoy. I'm pretty sure you're parents are." Seamus accused. Harry tensed but Draco

nudged him sharply before he smirked at Seamus, giving him a dark look.

“Well if they were, Finnegan, I wouldn’t be telling you, now would I?” He answered lightly. Ron and Hermione’s eyes widened while Harry and AJ now chuckled, since they knew what was going on anyway and that Draco was just trying to scare them.

All six heard a scream behind them and they whirled around to see a muggle woman through the trees being chased by a group of death eaters. One of them made her float in mid-air and another flipped her over, revealing much more than she would have wanted to reveal.

The effect this had on the young teenagers was quite amusing, to say the least. Hermione and AJ had both blushed darkly, looking away quickly. Both Ron and Seamus’ jaws had dropped open and they looked horrified while Harry and Draco’s eyes widened in surprise but they smirked slightly.

“Careful Granger... You wouldn’t want them to find *you*. Don’t want to be showing off your knickers in mid-air now, would you? Though I’ll admit, it might be a sight worth seeing.” Harry drawled slowly, his lust-filled eyes meeting Hermione’s again.

“I’m sure you would enjoy it, Potter.” She answered coldly, not giving in to his flirtatious behavior. Before anyone else could answer them, they suddenly heard a male voice behind them.

**“MOSMORDE!”**

AJ screamed loudly and both Harry and Draco had immediately reached forward and grasped her hand, Harry turning to face her with concern in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” He asked sharply, taking in the terror in his twin’s eyes. AJ shakily pointed to the sky behind them, her hand shaking. They all turned and gasped loudly at what they saw in the sky, a large skull with a serpent protruding from its mouth, large and glowing green.



Draco and Harry paled in horror while Ron and Seamus screamed loudly. Hermione's jaw dropped open as a number of ministry wizards appeared out of nowhere and surrounded them all, their wands outstretched.

"Duck!" Draco yelled as he pulled Harry and AJ down with him. The Gryffindors had only followed at the last minute before the wizards had all yelled out,

**"STUPEFY!"**

There was a huge, deafening bang before the young wizards had the courage to stand up, nervously looking around the angry looking wizards around them.

"Alright! Which one of you conjured the dark mark?! Huh?! Which one of you did it?!" Barty Crouch, a stern looking ministry wizard demanded, looking at them all furiously.

"Dark mark?" Harry asked Draco curiously in a hushed whisper.

"You-know-who's sign." He whispered back, frozen with absolute fear.

AJ tightened her grip on Harry's hand upon hearing this just as she felt Draco's tighten around hers, breathing heavily as her heart started to beat faster.

"It was you, wasn't it?! Lucius Malfoy's son?! Death eater!" Crouch suddenly accused, looking at Draco suspiciously. Draco flushed in anger and fury, raising his chin up defiantly at the man in front of him.

"N-no! I don't know how to conjure up that damn thing!" He yelled angrily, an angry flush in his pale cheeks.

"Now, Barty, be reasonable. These are only children. I doubt they have the skill to conjure up something as powerful as the dark mark." Arthur Weasley reasoned, looking at Ron sternly.

"I found this wand here in the bushes!" Amos Diggory suddenly yelled, emerging in front of them and holding out a wand.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Harry yelled, making a grab for it but Mr. Diggory kept it away from him.

“Aha! So you admit it then, Harry Potter?! I knew there was something not right about you! Hanging around with a bad crowd as Lucius Malfoy’s son and being a Slytherin, I always knew you were a dark wizard!” He accused, looking at Harry in shock who just glared back, a hateful sneer on his face.

“Think about what you are saying Amos! You think *Harry Potter* did it?!” Arthur Weasley said angrily. Mr. Diggory immediately looked foolish, backing away instantly.

“Er, yes... I suppose not. But then, who—”

He didn’t get to finish what he was about to say when another ministry member brought out what looked like a house-elf from the bushes. The elf was shaking timidly wasn’t meeting anyone’s eye. Harry saw Mr. Crouch’s eye twitch at the sight of the pitiful elf.

“You, *elf*! Why were you behind the bushes?!” Mr. Diggory asked sharply. The elf’s eyes widened at the implied accusation. “I is not doing anything sirs! I is only hiding when I is finding a wand and I—”

“So you admit to using the wand, then?!” Mr. Diggory interjected, narrowing his eyes.

“N-no! I is not doing anything! I is not knowing how!” The elf stammered again.

“Winky didn’t do anything! Winky has a squeaky voice! The voice we all heard was deep and was male!” Hermione interrupted bravely, a determined look on her face.

“*Winky*, you say? Isn’t she your house-elf, Barty?” Mr. Diggory asked suspiciously.

“Indeed... Perhaps you would allow me to deal with her for her actions, Amos. You may bring her in for further questioning if you like.” Mr. Crouch said coldly, not looking at his poor house-elf at his feet.

"N-no, master, I—"

"Fine. The rest of you, move along. I believe we've had enough trouble for one night." Amos agreed reluctantly, handing Harry back his wand and dragging along a protesting elf after him as he and the rest of the ministry members apparated out of sight.

"How the bloody hell did you come to know that elf, Granger?" Harry asked Hermione curtly, roughly grabbing her arm before she walked away. Hermione regarded him with a cold look, struggling with his grip.

"She was a friend of Dobby's. We met her up at the top box. She couldn't have possibly done that mark." She said steadily.

"*Dobby?* Draco's house-elf I freed in second year?!" Harry asked incredulously, recalling how he had freed the little house-elf just to spite Lucius Malfoy back in their second year. Draco had been pissed at him for weeks.

"Yes, Dobby. Now would you mind letting go of me?! I want to go somewhere free of people like you." Hermione snapped and roughly yanked her arm from his grasp.

"Of course." Harry said, flashing her another charming smile as he promptly let her go. Hermione scowled at him and stomped away, Ron and Seamus at her heels, all three of them looking quiet spooked and disturbed at what just happened.

"We better get going too, Harry. Come on, I hope mother and father are back at the house by now. It isn't safe to be staying around here." Draco said, dropping AJ's hand immediately as though he had just realized he had been holding it and shuddering before walking off, blushing slightly.

AJ nodded silently in agreement and followed after Draco, squeezing her twin's hand even tighter. Seeing that frightening mark had scared her out of her wits and she definitely needed to calm her nerves.

"You okay?" Harry asked her gently as they walked back to the miniature mansion. He looked at her in concern.

"I-I'll be fine, Harry. Thanks. I guess I was just shocked that's all." She said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I don't blame you, AJ. Nobody has seen that mark for 13 years! I'm surprised a death eater was brave enough to cast it tonight in the midst of so many people." Draco told them.

"Look, let's just drop it, okay? Let's not talk about it for a while." Harry said abruptly, wrapping a comforting arm around his sister as she shuddered. Draco nodded silently as AJ sighed heavily to herself.

She couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts. Then all she would have to worry about were her lessons, assignments and trying to figure out ways to somehow upstage Granger. She didn't think she could take all these nerve-wracking encounters anymore.

Taking a deep breath, she glanced at her brother out of the corner of her eye and without knowing it, she smiled to herself.

At least she would always have Harry there for her when she needed him.

**A/N: PLEASE REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 6- When Snakes Meet Lions

“Harry! Hurry up! I want to find an empty compartment!” AJ ordered as she raced into the barrier between Platform 9 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  on September first, an excited smile on her face. Harry growled to himself and heaved his sister’s heavy trunk along with his own and walked steadily to enter the platform.

Draco only smirked calmly behind him, carrying only a single trunk and his eagle owl’s cage and looking extremely relaxed. *What the fuck is he smiling about?* Harry thought, rolling his eyes at his best friend as they stepped aboard the Hogwarts express.

*Why do I always end up carrying AJ’s things?!* Harry thought irritably as he dragged the heavy trunks into the compartment AJ had just walked into. “What the hell do you carry in your trunk anyway?! Rocks?!” Harry snapped irritably, dropping the trunk loudly on the floor.

AJ just sat there, grinning innocently at him with wide, sweet eyes. Harry raised an eyebrow at her in response, obviously annoyed he was seen by a lot of people hauling around his sister’s luggage.

“You could say that. Damn, that was one fast summer wasn’t it? I had a lot of fun just hanging around Draco’s house.” She said as she patted both empty spaces next to her so Harry and Draco could both sit down. Draco beamed proudly at her, pleased at what she had said, sitting down her right side while Harry sat down on her left.

"I know. I swear, that was the best damn summer I've ever had!" He agreed, running a hand through his hair and giving Draco a light punch on the shoulder. Harry looked thoughtful for a minute, biting his lip.

"Yeah, we ought to spend more summers together. Definitely way better than with those dumb-ass Dursleys.." He said darkly as he took off his silver-framed glasses and began putting on his contacts. Draco smirked at him, an eyebrow raised slightly in a silent question.

"Since when did you start wearing contacts, Potter?" He asked curiously as Harry began trying them on. Harry's smirk mirrored his own. "Since I think I would definitely look a lot better without glasses. Especially now that your father just told us some Beauxbatons babes are coming to visit. I'm only trying them on for now. I'll probably alternate between contacts and glasses... I look in good in both anyway." Harry said, yawning.

AJ just groaned out loud at his remark while Draco rolled his eyes, both annoyed at Harry's arrogance.

During their enjoyable summer at Draco's house, his father had informed the three of them of the upcoming event this year at Hogwarts that they should all be looking forward to. He had explained that Hogwarts would be holding the TriWizard tournament with both Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, two other Wizarding schools in Europe, that year.

He had also said that the TriWizard tournament was a kind of special, magical contest between the three opposing schools of which one has better skills in magic-related abilities. Of course, the three of them were really interested to see where this was going to go and

who each school would be choosing as their representing champion in the tournament.

Draco and AJ had even suggested Harry to join but he had rubbed it off, saying, "I'm not going to be some dorky champion. I'm just interested in what's going to be happening. I couldn't care less who wins the damn prize." He scoffed.

The rest of the summer, the Slytherin trio had spent hanging around Malfoy Manor, Harry and AJ both impressed at the countless activities they could do in the huge mansion. Though through most of the summer Draco and Harry had just trained themselves outside Malfoys' large estate for Quidditch matches while AJ had spent most of her time reading in the Malfoys' large library, amazed at the numerous wonderful books she saw within the towering shelves.

She couldn't remember seeing so many rare, magnificent books all in one place, having learned much more in there than she ever did in the Hogwarts library itself and finding a lot of different facts about the Wizarding world that she had not known about.

Though she was particularly curious at night times when Harry and Draco would both stay up very late and, as they claim to do, *research* in the library and the morning after, she always appeared so tired at what they had researched on...

Sometimes, she could have sworn she had heard them both muttering a lot of weird sounding spells at night times outside the manor when they thought she was asleep... She did not recognize any of the spells they were practicing with but she didn't question them further about it, respecting their wish to keep it private.

*I just hope they won't get themselves into trouble with these new spells...* She thought for a moment before Draco began engaging her in a conversation about the TriWizard tournament, sparking her interest immediately.

Harry yawned loudly and visibly tuned out as Draco and AJ began to talk about the TriWizard tournament, expecting another one of their famous arguments or debates to break loose soon after. Frankly, he didn't give a damn about what was going to be happening this year. After what they had witnessed in the Quidditch World Cup, he realized he had other important matters to think about.

A dark and silent look on his face, he stared out the window of the train, silently contemplating on what he would be facing this year.

*Well... I'm pretty sure that fucking asshole Voldemort was planning something..* He thought coldly, narrowing his eyes.

Lucius had already told them that Voldemort had indeed grown stronger than last time and that he didn't know yet but he was planning something—something that would involve Harry, no doubt.

However, Lucius had been quite surprised when Harry had taken this lightly. To be honest, Harry didn't have to feel any sense of fear if Voldemort would choose to go after him.

It was something he could learn to live with, being wanted dead by an evil wizard. He was okay with his life being at risk... He had grown to live with that but...Harry tensed up immediately, his hands tightening into fists.

His eye twitched slightly as his facial expression grew even more intense. There was only one thing in the world that Harry was afraid of. Just one... *Losing his sister.*



Slowly, he turned to look at his twin by the corner of his eye. Though Harry was only older than AJ by a measly five minutes, sometimes he felt like those five minutes were five years. Somehow he had grown accustomed to looking out for her safety ever since they were young children. Maybe he loved her so much because she was all he ever had back when they were still being tormented by the Dursleys.

They only had each other for support for eleven years... It was normal for his protectiveness over her. *Voldemort can hunt after me and plan to kill me if he wants but he better not be thinking of involving AJ in this...* Harry thought darkly.

It was the only reason he still feared the evil wizard's wrath. For his own safety, he could not give a damn. Looking at his sister again, he marveled at the fact how much they looked like.

*It was like having a gender opposite of each other.* Harry thought in amusement. AJ was laughing at something Draco was saying but when she noticed Harry looking at her like that, she raised both her eyebrows at him.

"Are you okay, Harry?" She asked in concern. Harry just lifted his lips in a weak half-smirk before he nodded and stood up slowly. "I think I'm going to get some fresh air. I need some time to myself." He told them, a serious look on his features.

AJ and Draco both nodded immediately, not wanting to upset him. They both knew Harry enough that when he said he needed some

time to himself, it was best to give it to him if they didn't want to face his fierce temper.

Harry began walking to the door when he felt someone fling it open abruptly. Having alert reflexes, Harry caught the door calmly by his hand about an inch from his face. Extremely pissed off, he narrowed his eyes and eyed the offender with an intimidating glare from his feet slowly up to his face.

Almost immediately, he felt his lips curve into a small snide sneer as he saw the person in front of him.

Ronald Weasley found himself glaring at the sneering face of Harry Potter, obvious resentment on his features.

"Weasley. What have we done for you to honor us with your *overwhelming* presence?" Potter asked, his tone flat and emotionless. Ron felt his face flame up angrily at the implied, sarcastic remark.

"Apparently I should be the one asking you that Mr. Harry Potter, the boy-with-the-ugly-scar on the forehead." He retorted sarcastically. Potter didn't even so much as flinch at the comeback.

That was probably what Ron hated about Potter so much. He never showed his reactions to the taunts Ron gave him so he never knew if he was at least getting to the Slytherin somehow. Unlike Malfoy who basically scowled or made a horrible snarl whenever he was pissed at Ron's comments, Potter just stared at him with his intense, blank glare, which made him squirm around uncomfortably.

Looking at Potter now, Ron noticed his face once again remained the same before the insult, emotionless and blank. "Weasley, as much as I love these little chats of ours, sad to say I am not in the mood to deal with your crude little insults right now. Now if you would get the fuck out of my way, perhaps I'll save you the trouble of ending up in the Hospital wing." He said darkly, a menacing look in his eyes, which made Ron slightly nervous.

"Oh yeah, Potter? Was that a challenge?! What are you going to do? Send your little dark league of Slytherins at me?!" Ron persisted, shoving the raven-haired Slytherin roughly.

Potter barely reacted but he did raise his head up abruptly to meet Ron's eyes. Ron's eyes widened when he saw the intense anger in the other boy's eyes. *Now I know why Mione says his eyes are so frightening...I swear...He's not the hero everyone perceives him to be...*He thought.

AJ, sensing something bad was going to happen, nudged Draco in panic, who was too busy watching the fight with interest. "Draco! Break them up! They're going to start fighting!" She hissed hastily, her eyes wide with nervousness.

Draco looked at her as if she had grown two extra heads right in front of him. "Are you mad?! Why? It's been a long time I've seen Harry in action and besides, it's Weasley who has to back down. You know how your brother gets whenever he's pissed..." Draco said, sniggering.

*That's exactly what I'm afraid of...* AJ thought in panic as she nudged Draco again, this time, harder. "Draco! Break them up now! If they both get in trouble, we'll be blamed for not stopping them!" She pointed out again.

This time Draco scowled and reluctantly stood up from his seat, disappointed at having to stop a good fight. *I hate spoiling good entertainment...* He thought as he walked over to where Harry and Ron were still locked in a fierce glaring contest.

From the looks of things, Ron was beginning to squirm uncomfortably while Harry just glared at him, unblinking and his muscles tensing.

"Hey Weasley! You up for joining the event this year?!" Draco interrupted, walking up right between him and Harry. Ron blinked, temporarily distracted and looked at Draco's equally disdainful face, narrowing his eyes irritably.

"What the bloody hell are you talking about Malfoy?"

Draco just flashed him a superior smirk, widening his eyes in mock surprise. "*You* know, are you joining this year? I hear they have a pretty big amount of prize money so it might actually do you some good if you ever manage to win." He taunted. Harry visibly calmed down slightly beside him and snorted derisively.

“Honestly, Malfoy, what the bloody hell are you talking about?” Ron asked again, looking extremely irritated. Draco’s eyes widened again, an amused smile on his face. “You mean you don’t know?!” He asked incredulously.

“Yeah, what good is it to have a father in the ministry if he isn’t going to tell you stuff, Weasley?” AJ piped up, laughing along with Draco from where she still sat calmly. Ron turned beet red, snapping his gaze from Draco to the raven-haired girl in absolute hatred, annoyed at the calm smile AJ shot him in return.

“Why don’t you stay out of this, you good for nothing bitch?! This is a talk between *men*.” Ron yelled at her snidely, causing her to widen her eyes in anger.

“What did you just say?!” AJ demanded, bolting up from her seat and walking up to Ron with her eyes blazing. Ron gave her a sneer.

“I called you a bitch. *Bitch*.” He taunted again causing Harry to lunge at him dangerously but AJ held him back, shaking her head. “Watch what you say, asshole!!” Harry yelled at him, cursing while Draco glared at Ron with utmost despise.

“Aw...Found your soft spot, Potter?” Ron mocked, smirking back at the Slytherins. AJ felt her face flame up in hurt and humiliation but she hid it from the redheaded Gryffindor, turning her face away.

“Ignore him, Harry. He’s just bitter, that’s all.” She said, throwing Ron a careless glance.

“And quit boasting about what your father told you. It’s probably not even true anyway. Whatever the hell it is...” Ron continued, throwing Draco a haughty glare.

“You don’t have to be jealous Weasley. Father’s informed us ages ago. Of course it’s quite understandable since *my* father is always associated with top people at the ministry. Perhaps—”

Draco didn’t finish what he was going to say when two other familiar people walked into the compartment. Harry instantly felt an evil smile tug at his lips when he saw just who the other one was.

The moment Hermione and Seamus had walked into the compartment; she knew there was something going on. Ron was facing both Potters *and* Malfoy all by himself while the said three looked incredibly pissed off. AJ was holding Harry back from jumping on Ron and punching his lights out while Ron and Malfoy seemed to be engaged in a heated dispute of some sort.

“Ay! We better break things up Hermione! We don’t want any trouble!” Seamus said as he went over behind Ron to prevent him from leaping up onto Malfoy. Hermione felt her heart leap slightly at the sight of Harry’s usual get-up, trying hard not to admire just how handsome he truly was, despite his obnoxious personality.

She was guessing he used a considerable amount of hair gel to style his hair into soft, sexy spikes on the top of his head while he had worn faded black jeans and a silk green shirt.

A raven-shaped silver earring hung from his left ear and a matching pendant, which had black sapphires as its eyes on a thick silver chain hung down from his neck. Hermione blushed when she realized she had been eyeing him up and down so she turned to look at AJ instead, who was glaring at her.

Shaking her head and ashamed of her own overactive teenage hormones, she turned to look at Ron. He was going on and on, arguing with Draco about their fathers' accomplishments, obviously both getting more pissed off by the minute.

Shaking her head, she finally spoke up, trying to distract Ron's attention away from the sneering blonde. "Ron, why don't we just get out of here? We have better things to do." She said coldly, earning her an unreadable look from Harry.

"Yeah, get out of here. You wouldn't want to spend the first week back in the hospital wing, now would you?" Draco threatened. Ron just glared back defiantly, his eyes flashing.

"Shut up, Malfoy! Why don't you, Potter *and* the little *slut* over there go and find some other unfortunate person to pester?! We don't have time for the likes of you!" Ron returned derisively, throwing a spiteful glance at AJ.

AJ's jaw dropped open before she walked forward and met Ron's eye in a silent challenge. "Did you just call me a *slut*?!"

"Why not? That's what you really are, right? You do present yourself like one anyway." AJ gasped at the harsh insult, her eyes widening and tearing up slightly at the same time. Walking forward, she slapped Ron hard, a furious look of hurt on her tearful face.

The two of them glared at each other for a minute, their eyes locked onto each other in a silent match. Then without another word, she bolted out of the compartment, shoving Hermione and Seamus out of the way.

Harry's jaw dropped open and he gave Ron such a frightening look that it would have intimidated Voldemort. "You are going to pay for that one, Weasley. Big time." He promised darkly as he followed after his twin, shaking his head in anger.

"Get the bloody hell out of here! I think you've done enough damage!" Draco yelled at the three of them. Ron gave him a mocking grin, obviously pleased with having won an argument over the Slytherin trio.

Seamus scowl darkened as he glared right back at Draco in response. "Fine, Malfoy. We are. Come on Ron, Hermione, let's leave this git alone." He said as he started to leave the compartment when Hermione grabbed his arm.



“Wait. You and Ron go on ahead. I’ll catch up in a bit. I just have to talk to someone for a minute.” She said. The two of them nodded and walked off to another empty compartment while Hermione searched around for a sign of two raven-haired students, surprised at the concern she felt for the Slytherins.

“Oh, hey, Cho! Have you seen the Potter twins?” Hermione asked as she met up with the pretty fifth year Ravenclaw prefect along the train’s corridors.

Cho narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “The *Potter* twins? I think I saw AJ race down to the very last compartment on the train but since when did you become so interested in them?” She asked in surprise. Hermione just shrugged helplessly, forcing out a weak laugh.

“I have no idea myself.” She muttered, saying thanks before she walked down to the end of the train and pressed her ear against the door of the compartment just enough to hear what they were saying. Hermione frowned. She could only hear muffled whispers. She needed to see what they were doing.

Slowly, Hermione nervously peeked through a small creak in the door to see AJ sitting down in while Harry was kneeling in front of her, trying to comfort her. Recovering from shock at seeing the great and horrible Harry Potter kneeling, Hermione shook her head and listened to their conversation.

“Shhh... Forget about what the bloody git said, AJ... You know how fucked up he is. Come on...” Harry said gently as he tucked away a strand of AJ’s hair behind her ear. AJ didn’t respond as she turned away and wiped her eyes angrily.

“What the hell does Weasley think of me?! A slut?! Is that what he thinks?! Hell, I haven’t even been in a relationship! How dare he assume things about me just like that! He doesn’t even know me!” She raged, hot tears angrily spilling down again.

Harry gave her a small, gentle smile and handed his handkerchief. AJ took it gratefully and wiped her runny eyes, sniffing again. She felt her twin squeeze her hand in an affectionate manner.

“I know. Don’t worry about it. Look, whatever he said was just crap. He was probably just jealous of you as usual. We don’t have anything to be ashamed of, you know...” He told her, planting a loving kiss on her scar.

AJ smiled through her tears and managed a weak laugh. “I guess you’re right... I’m sorry... I just—” She didn’t finish as her voice choked up again slightly, trying hard to stop the tears from falling.

Harry cursed under his breath and Hermione couldn’t have sworn it was something like, “Weasley is a dead...” before he wrapped both arms around his twin, pulling her into a hug.

AJ collapsed into his arms, kneeling down next to him on the floor and crying very softly against him while he rubbed her back in a soothing manner, stroking her hair as he whispered to her. AJ was still crying but Hermione could make out what they were talking about.

“I’m really sorry Harry... I’m acting like a weak, pathetic fool... It’s just that... Being called a *slut* just reminds me of the time Dudley used to taunt me with that word when we were younger...It makes me feel so

pathetic and worthless, I—” AJ’s voice choked up again and Hermione noticed Harry’s arms tighten around her trembling form.

AJ took a shaky breath, raising her head up to meet her brother’s gaze. “Do you remember? Dudley and his friends ganged up on us and then they tied you up and locked me in a broom closet for hours as their sick joke...” AJ said, her voice shaking.

Harry scowled at the harsh, traumatizing memory but nodded wordlessly, biting his tongue to keep from cursing. “It was horrible Harry... It was so dark and... They kept screaming ‘*slut*’ at me while I was in there... Harry, I was so scared...I was so afraid of being in there...All alone in the dark...” She said, sobbing against him.

Harry, for once in his life, couldn’t say anything but hold her tightly, remembering the traumatic effect that incident had caused his sister. Ever since that had happened, he remembered that AJ had suddenly developed a mild fear of the dark or loud, banging sounds and had even developed a weak case of claustrophobia whenever she became nervous.

“I kept yelling and yelling and nobody came.... I was so afraid...I—” AJ’s voice cracked as Harry shushed her gently, stroking her hair. He looked anguished.

“I know...I’m sorry I couldn’t defend you before... I was so weak and beaten up that I didn’t have the strength... I couldn’t do anything...” He said softly, looking pained. AJ looked up at him with wide tearful eyes, shaking her head hastily to reassure him that it wasn’t his fault.

"No, it wasn't your fault, Harry... *Nothing*.. Could have prevented that... Okay?" She asked, looking at him intently. Harry nodded but clenched his jaw tightly at the horrible memory as it still brought him that much hated feeling of being weak and pathetic... He hated that feeling.. *Hated* it...He would make it up to her...He would defend his sister from everything now...He wouldn't let anyone traumatize her again...

Hermione felt her heart melt as she watched the two of them intently, suddenly feeling all of the loathing she felt towards the Potter twins disappear within an instant. She couldn't explain it but she saw it... By the looks on their faces that the Potter twins were not as cold as everyone thought they were. They could see a whole new side to them right now... It was quite disturbing actually but it warmed her heart to see them like this..

"Look...Forget about what Weasley said okay? And forget about what happened, it's over and done with. Let's go back to our compartment okay? Our other friends are all probably waiting there. Are you going to be okay?" Harry asked AJ, looking at her intently.

AJ sniffed and wiped her eyes again but she nodded and gave him a reassuring smile. "I-I'll be fine Harry... Thanks... For just being there." She said softly, not meeting his eyes.

Harry tilted her face up to meet his eyes, giving her a warm smile that silently answered her. Both sets of emerald orbs gazed at each other with both complete trust and openness.

"Hey, you know you can always count on me, right? That's why I'm here. I'm here to always take care and love my sister." He assured her with a lopsided grin. Despite the way Hermione saw Harry as a cold and uncaring, she felt a small, touched smile spread across her lips when she heard him say that to his twin.

*I guess there's a side to Harry Potter than no one else sees...He really does love his sister despite all their arguments in public. I never knew he could be this sweet towards her.* Hermione thought, a warm blush rising up in her cheeks.

*I guess with a past like theirs, they had no choice but to rely on each other all their lives...It's just that...Why does he only show that wonderful side of himself to AJ? Why does he have to be such a jerk to everyone else?* Hermione wondered, watching the twins intently.

AJ laughed through her tears and stood up, dusting her skirt as she did. "You ready to go back now?" Harry asked her, squeezing her hand in question. AJ smiled at him tenderly and nodded, hastily wiping her eyes with the handkerchief he gave her.

"By the way, don't bother returning that handkerchief to me." Harry kidded, laughing as AJ pretended to scowl momentarily and swat him on the head.

"Prat! It's not like used it to blow my nose or anything!" She declared, rolling her still swollen eyes. Harry grinned sheepishly. "I know. I was just kidding, AJ. Lighten up. I just wanted to make you smile." He said softly.

AJ couldn't help but give a small smile indeed as she jumped into his arms and hugged him tightly, kissing him on the cheek. "Thanks jerk-face. You're the best." She said affectionately before she pulled back from the hug and smiled at him, walking out of the room.

*Uh-oh, I better hide, quick!* Hermione thought as she frantically searched around her surroundings in panic. She gulped and dashed into the nearest compartment to theirs to avoid being seen by the Slytherin girl, smiling apologetically at the occupants who were staring at her in a weird, unflattering way.

Once AJ had gone, she walked out of the compartment and was surprised to see Harry leaning against the wall of the corridor, glaring at her with his arms crossed over his chest.

*Oh Merlin, did he know I was watching them the whole time?* Hermione thought dreadfully. Before she could say anything, Harry had grabbed her by the arm roughly and had pulled her into the compartment he and AJ had been in earlier and slammed the door shut violently.

Hermione winced at his obvious anger. Finally, Harry turned to face her, intimidating her with his height as he met his eyes with hers. Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. "Enjoy the show, Granger?" He asked sharply, his eyes narrowing.

Hermione flushed red in the embarrassment of having intruded on a private moment of her enemies. "I don't know what you mean, Potter. I didn't see anything." She said, not meeting his gaze.

"Oh I think you know what I mean, Granger. You were watching us the whole bloody damn time. I didn't call you in on it because I was too busy comforting my sister but I'll have you know that that was a

*fucking* personal moment.” Harry said, his voice steady and as hard as steel.

Hermione’s eyes fell in guilt and shame as she stepped back slightly from him.

“I know... And I’m sorry Harry. I was just curious, that’s all..” She reasoned. Harry’s eyes suddenly flashed angrily.

“*Curious?! You* intruded on our private conversation! What right did you have to watch us like that?! Don’t you have respect for other people’s privacy?!” Harry accused in fury.

“I-I’m sorry Potter, it just seemed like a good idea at the time.” Hermione replied carefully, looking at Harry intently.

“Well don’t get any more *good* ideas, Granger. That was the first and the bloody last time you would see us like that. And it would be best for you to keep this to yourself.” Harry threatened dangerously.

“Why are you so ashamed of what happened anyway? There was nothing wrong with what I witnessed. You seem to be the perfect older brother to your sister and from what I saw; you really do seem to care for her very much.” Hermione protested.

“I do care for her very much, *mudblood*. She’s my damn twin, for Merlin’s sake, and of course I love her but whatever happens between AJ and myself and whatever we talk about in our lives is our

own damn business so just *fuck* off Granger!” Harry snapped at her, his scowl darkening.

“I just wanted to see for myself how much of a good brother you are. Harry I—”

“*Harry*?? Since when did I give you permission to call me by my first name, Granger? We’re not *friends* you know!”

“Oh Fine! Potter.” Hermione corrected, rolling her eyes. “Potter, I was just curious to see if you really are the bastard everyone thinks you are. Apparently, from what I can see, I think you aren’t.” She said sincerely.

Harry narrowed his eyes and backed away, insulted at the Gryffindor’s sincere comment. “Don’t pretend you know me Granger. You don’t know a damn thing about me. Not a *damn* thing. Stay the hell away from my life; I don’t want to be meddled with.” He answered coldly.

Hermione didn’t look intimidated by his cold tone of voice as she took another step towards him, a knowing gleam in her eye. “Know what I think, Harry? I think you’re scared. You’re scared of so many different things that you hide it behind your cold, dark mask and your aggression. Sure you only show your real side to AJ but you hardly ever let that side of you surface at all.” Hermione told him knowingly.

Harry snorted derisively and raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Nice try but I don’t believe in that psychology crap, Granger. And I am *not*



scared. I've forgotten *how* to be scared... I don't even know the feeling." He said, his voice distant for a minute.

For a minute, Hermione could have sworn she saw a trace of open hostility in his face before almost instantly, it was gone once again as if it never been there. Then, Harry shook his head and once again, his usual self-righteous smirk reappearing once again.

"You think you're so clever, don't you Granger?" He asked in a sinister manner, stepping closer towards her with an evil glint in his eye.

Hermione squelched her gasp and took a step back immediately. If there was one thing she learned about dealing with Harry Potter, it was that you should never show your fear or your intimidation to him.

*You should never show him your weaknesses and you must never give in to him at all. Sort of like playing hard-to-get but only difference is, he's never going to get you. Come on Hermione, work it...* A voice encouraged inside her head desperately.

"You think you know how to manipulate everyone? You think you know just how everyone thinks and acts that you can tell them how they are? You think you know everyone better than they themselves do?" Harry continued darkly, taking another step forward, smirking when he noticed Hermione back away again.

Hermione held her breath as he continued to corner her slowly into the compartment. Her eyes widened slightly when she felt her back press up against the cold compartment wall.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her, his gaze so intense that Hermione felt as if his eyes were burning a hole right through her.

“Trust me; you don’t *want* to know me Granger. I’ve had it up to here with this little game of yours. Trying to read who I am will not help you at all. I’m not and I can *never* be the person that you want me to be. People—no, *Slytherins* like me *don’t* change.” He hissed, his voice menacingly frightening.

“And just what do you mean by that, Potter?” Hermione countered, though weakly as her voice was barely above a whisper but she was sure the Slytherin had heard her. Harry just raised an eyebrow, walking up to her so that their faces were merely inches apart.

“What you see is exactly what you get. I don’t have to hide anything. I have nothing to hide anymore.” He drawled easily in response. Hermione scowled at him, obviously not convinced by his answer.

“I *don’t* believe you. Know what I think? I think you’re a bloody *coward*, Harry Potter. You hide your real self. That’s not a hero, at all.” She said spitefully.

Harry tensed visibly as he glowered at her. “Who says I’m a hero? And I’ve never been afraid of anything in my life, Granger. You don’t have any idea what the hell you’re talking about so just don’t even try.” He snapped.

“I may not know you that well, Potter. But I do know one thing. The thing that you are most afraid of is *yourself*. You’re afraid of opening

up to other people because you don't want them to know you." Hermione told him.

Harry clenched his hands into tight fists, his eyes now flashing dangerously at her in pure, unadulterated malice. "Leave it alone, Granger. I do not need to hear this from you of all people. And I especially don't need a mudblood like you to tell me what I feel and who I am." He said, making it sound like the conversation was over.

Hermione sighed. "Didn't you ever think that I was just trying to help?" She asked, obviously giving up.

Harry just stared at her blankly. "I don't need any help. I can take care of myself. I always have." He said, resting both his hands on the wall above Hermione's head, caging her in between him and the wall. Hermione squelched the gasp that had wanted to escape her lips.

"Didn't you ever think that there was somebody else out there who could try to understand?" Hermione persisted, her voice a shaky whisper. Harry let out a sneer, amused by the girl's determination.

"What is this new sudden interest in me, Granger? I take it you have been thinking a lot about this..." Harry said, his tone filled with amusement.

"Yeah, well, it had crossed my mind several times." Hermione said bitterly, looking crossly at the floor, not wanting to meet his forceful gaze. Harry let out a low laugh to himself.

"Is that so?" He asked, letting his gaze linger on her face. Hermione's breath caught in her throat as he gently traced a line on her cheek

with his finger, coming to rest under her chin. Harry's eyes studied her features intently, as if he was trying to memorize the outlines of her face.

She tensed in anticipation as he tilted her chin upwards to meet his cold, glinting emerald eyes. *I swear...Even when they're cold and emotionless, his eyes are so beautiful...I...*Hermione gazed at him.

"Harry, I—"

Hermione instantly forgot her train of thought when Harry closed the last remaining inches between them and roughly pressed his lips against hers in a passionate kiss. Hermione felt her heart jump into her throat as Harry wrapped both his firm arms around her waist and pulled her close, deepening the kiss with much more intensity, much more fervor that Hermione felt faint from the exhilaration.

He seemed to know pretty much what he was doing, as he kissed her with so much force that her lips were tingling from the mere feeling of his lips caressing hers. Hermione could smell the faint musky-scented aftershave he used as he ran his fingers through her hair, his hands surprisingly gentle.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had encircled her arms around his neck and had pulled him closer, kissing him back with equal passion and desire that she even felt Harry stiffen slightly in surprise before relaxing again and stroking her cheek with his hand.

Though the kiss started out gentle, Hermione stiffened when she felt Harry tensing with impatience and starting to kiss her in a more persistent, rough manner.

The change in mood was enough to jolt Hermione back to her senses and analyze the whole, ridiculous situation. *What the hell am I doing?! I am kissing Harry Potter! I should not be doing this! This is wrong! I should not be giving in to him!* She thought as she tried to wrench her mouth away.

However, this act of persistence only provoked the Slytherin boy more and caused him to tighten his arms around her and press his lips harder against hers. She felt him press himself harder against her until she finally cleared her thoughts away and wrenched herself from his arms.

Gasping slightly for air, she raised a hand and slapped him hard across his pale, smooth cheek. "You smarmy bastard! How dare you!" Hermione screeched, breathing hard both from the kiss and from anger.

Harry just smirked again and clutched his cheek lightly, not even wincing in pain until he let his smirk bloom into a sideways, lopsided grin. "Why Granger... I never knew you could kiss so passionately.. Kinda turns me on." He taunted, winking and licking his lips.

Hermione flushed bright pink and glared at him in disgust, shaking with suppressed anger. "Potter, you are—you're just—I—you—*Whatever*, you're *sick*!" She stuttered, looking at him in revulsion and shoving him away from her.

Harry raised a single eyebrow in apprehension and doubt, not at all taken back by her harsh insult. "I believe you were kissing me back Granger. Why bother denying something we both are guilty for?" He answered calmly, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall again.

Hermione watched as his lips quirked itself into a superior smile, feeling another strong surge of anger rush through her again. *The same lips that had been on mine just a minute ago. The same lips that must have kissed about a dozen girls already before... The same...Agh!* Hermione thought, shaking her head furiously.

"Care for another one?" He asked enticingly as he once again took a step towards her but Hermione slapped him again and shoved him backwards. "What is it with you and bitch slaps?" Harry asked, annoyed as he rubbed his cheek.

Hermione was pleased to see that this time, it was actually turning red in pain and Harry was actually wincing slightly in pain. "I swear Potter. If you ever, ever, come near me again, if you so much as touch me or come within a five foot distance from me, I will personally remove your crotch from your body, do you understand?" Hermione threatened, her eyes cold.

Harry just snorted derisively, though a nervous glint had appeared very quickly in his eyes. "Is that a threat, Ms. Granger?" He taunted in amusement. Hermione met his gaze steadily, her eyes cold and vengeful

"It's a *warning*, Mr. Potter. If you ever expect to have children at all, at least, you better stay the hell away from me because you *disgust* me." She said sharply before she walked around him as if he were some sort of inanimate object and walked out the compartment.

Harry grabbed her arm and roughly spun her around to face him. Hermione was surprised to see an amused smile on his face rather than an insulted scowl.

"Well then, watch your back Granger. I've always loved a good challenge. You never know when a snake is lurking around in the shadows, ready to *bite* you..." He whispered in an intimidating tone of voice.

Hermione glared back at him and yanked her arm away. "Don't worry. I will." She retorted sarcastically before she threw him one more look of disgust and stormed out of the compartment.

Harry stared after her, a mysterious, all-knowing smile on his face. Silently, he chuckled to himself.

"We shall see how strong you really are... *Hermione*..."

"Where were you Hermione?" Ron asked her as she entered their compartment, visibly still pretty shaken up and flushing red.

"Yeah, and are you okay? You look pretty bothered." Seamus asked, looking at her in concern. Ron and Seamus were currently playing

with their exploding snaps and munching on their chocolate frogs while laughing and sniggering to each other.

Hermione sighed and sat down across from them, burying her head in her hands. “I—I’m fine you guys. I’m just a bit dizzy, that’s all. I just need to rest for a bit.” She said weakly, shaking her head.

They both nodded as Hermione closed her eyes from all the thinking, feeling the room spinning around her.

“Man, I’d really like to stuff a hippogriff down Potter’s throat. I swear, he really annoyed me earlier. He and Malfoy take some kind of sick pleasure in tormenting us.” Ron complained bitterly, tensing up at the mention of his enemies’ names.

Hermione felt an uncontrollable shiver run down her spine at the mention of Harry’s name but she scowled and shrugged it off, annoyed at herself that she let it affect her like that.

Seamus rolled his eyes. “At least we can think of a way to get back at them... What do you say we play a trick on the Slytherins this year?” He suggested mischievously.

Hermione couldn’t help but feel irritated. “Don’t bother. The last time we tried pulling a trick on them, we ended up being the fools. Tricks are right up their alley anyway.” She pointed out grumpily.



“Yeah, she has a point Seamus. They’d probably find a way to turn that trick on us like they always do.” Ron agreed, though reluctantly, looking at Hermione in confusion.

Hermione hung her head down guiltily. She hadn’t meant to take out her irritation on her friends... She was just really messed up right now. She couldn’t think straight.

Seamus looked disappointed but agreed. “What started the fight you and Potter had anyway?” He asked Ron. Hermione looked up, interested at the mention of Harry again.

“Well, he and Malfoy were going on about something that was going to happen this year and started asking me if I was going to join or something.” Ron started to explain. Seamus and Hermione looked at him in confusion.

“I know, it was really weird and then they started talking about how my father didn’t know about it and me joining it for the prize money. Whatever *it* was.” Ron said, shaking his head.

“Maybe they were just making something up or something just to annoy you.” Seamus quipped, shrugging. Hermione wrinkled her forehead.

“No, I don’t think so Seamus. They wouldn’t make something up like that. I wonder what they were talking about...” She wondered out loud. Ron and Seamus both snorted in disinterest.

“Forget it, Mione. We shouldn’t spend the rest of the trip pondering about what those two gits said.” Ron said, waving a hand dismissively.

“Where were you anyway? You didn’t exactly answer Ron’s question earlier.” Seamus asked her curiously. Hermione’s face darkened but she forced a laugh out, hoping they didn’t notice her intense blush.

“I just got hungry earlier so I went to buy some pastries.” She lied, hoping that it was somewhat believable since she had never lied to anyone before. Hermione felt relieved when Seamus laughed and Ron grinned.

“Why didn’t you save some for us?” Ron joked.

“Well I did say I was hungry Ron. Give a girl a break.” Hermione replied, rolling her eyes.

“For a minute, I thought it was going to be something like you snogging Blaise Zabini.” Ron said, shaking his head in laughter. Hermione gulped but grinned at Ron.

*Nice try Ron...No, I haven’t been snogging Blaise Zabini alright. More like I’ve just been lip-locking with Slytherin Harry James Potter.* She thought sarcastically, clenching her hands into fists to prevent them from shaking.

She felt her stomach churn but she ignored it and gave Ron another forced smile. "Please. I would rather kiss a flobberworm than to ever kiss one of those Slytherin pricks." She said, making a face she hoped showed disgust at the idea.

Both boys laughed and visibly relaxed, relieved that Hermione was more or less acting normal again. "How about you Ronnie-boy? Fancy a kiss from a certain Slytherin yourself?" Seamus teased, grinning slyly.

Ron glared at him. "Shut up, Seamus. Don't start that again." He warned. Seamus just laughed and winked at Hermione who grinned back weakly. As they began playing exploding snaps again, Hermione let out the breath she had been holding.

After what happened today, there was no doubt about it. Harry Potter was indeed just going to be a lot of trouble. She definitely should prevent anymore unwanted 'encounters' with the raven-haired Slytherin boy. She didn't know if she could handle anymore.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked AJ gently as she sat down next to him back in their compartment.

Right after Harry and AJ had both stormed out, Blaise and Pansy had entered the compartment, much to his annoyance. When the two had started asking their rather annoying questions about how his summer had gone, he had situated himself on the opposite side of the compartment and had sulked, looking out the window of the train.

He had been quite relieved when AJ came back but he was surprised to see a look of slight depression on the girl's face. Draco studied her features intently, secretly taking in every detail of her exquisite beauty.

He didn't really understand why, but unlike all the other girls he had dealt with in the past, he had always felt a great sense of regarding AJ with much more gentleness. It just wasn't because she was his best friend's twin sister but also because she seemed, to him, extremely fragile and delicate that he was afraid of hurting her in anyway that he might.

There was something much more complicated and special in the way she should be treated. He could see it all in her unmasked emerald eyes. Draco, being around the Potter twins for quite some time now, has been able to point out one major difference between the Potter twins—their eyes.

Now any normal person would simply state out that their eyes were incredibly identical to each other but if one were to look past the eyes and actually read what was in them, they would see that there was indeed a big difference between the two.

Harry's eyes always seemed guarded...*Masked* somehow. He had found a way to prevent his inner feelings to be expressed in his eyes so that his gaze on a person always seemed to be unreadable.

No body could really tell what Harry was feeling by looking at his eyes. They were as cold as ice and were as cautious of somewhat. Harry never liked it when someone could tell what he was feeling. He didn't like attention. He didn't like being delicate and helpless.

AJ, however, was a lot different. Unlike her brother, AJ's eyes were always very expressive and open that you could easily read what the girl was feeling. That was why she seemed so delicate to Draco, and that was why Harry took it upon himself to protect her because of that open hostility. That's why he took it upon himself to be the one to guard his twin's weaknesses.

*AJ's eyes are one of the main reasons why I like her so much...I find her vulnerability and her openness are the ones that make her so pure and untainted... So innocent...* Draco thought, admiring how a lock of her raven hair seemed to brush against her cheek.

Now unlike what most people thought, Draco actually did know a lot more about the Potter twins than other people did. Maybe it was because he was always with them that he grew to understand them in a way.

That was probably the reason why Harry has always considered him as his best friend. He knew them a lot better than their other friends did... He could understand them. Sure, they would always put up quite a show in public but they were more open with each other than people thought.

Sighing, he gently placed his hand over hers in a comforting manner, his fingers lightly caressing the soft limb in smooth, soothing circles.

"Hey, I take it you're still a bit sore from what Weasley called you, am I right?" He asked lightly. AJ gave him a weak, lopsided smile but

nodded nevertheless, her eyes trained on his fingers as he intertwined them with her own, causing her to blush lightly.

"I'm fine, you idiot... I've already talked to Harry about it. I'll be fine... It just hurt a lot...But I'm okay now, really...You don't have to keep fussing over me, you big dolt." She snapped weakly but a gentle smile was on her face.

"Who's fussing over *you*, you idiot? I was just asking...I swear, you should have seen how ugly your face was when you ran out of the compartment earlier..." He pointed out, giving her a smug smirk to hide the blush rising up to his pale cheeks.

AJ couldn't help but laugh at the embarrassed blush on Draco's face, shaking her head in amusement at his defensive tone of voice. "Probably not as ugly as you are right now with your face all red as a tomato, Malfoy..." She retorted, easily returning the smirk.

Draco glared at her but it was so weak that AJ had to smile again, her eyes brightening for a brief moment before they dimmed once more and she looked down, biting her lip in deep thought.

"Draco...Do you...Do you think I'm a slut?" She asked softly, her eyes pained as she briefly remembered the harshness of Ron's tone when he had spoken to her. Draco gave her a rueful grin, raising an eyebrow in curiosity. "Is that supposed to be a trick question, Potter?" He kidded lightly.

He immediately regretted his words the moment he saw the wounded look on AJ's delicate face. Draco swore under his breath, giving the girl's soft, delicate hand an affectionate squeeze of comfort.

*I swear...Weasley has definitely gone over the edge...AJ is anything BUT a slut...I can't believe he had the nerve to call her that...He thought angrily.*

“Well, if it makes you feel better, the only slut I know of is sitting right across from us.” Draco said, gesturing across the room. AJ turned and saw their other friend, Pansy Parkinson, talking to her best friend Blaise on the seat across from them.

AJ couldn't help it. She laughed and elbowed Draco sharply in the ribs, shaking her head at him. “You git! You are *such* an egoistic, sexist and insensitive jerk.” She said, laughing in spite of her own words.

Draco grinned in response and shrugged, finally noticing their hands still intertwined together and blushed, pulling away as though AJ's hand had caught on fire. Coughing, AJ looked away as well, her face heating up once more.

Draco scoffed to hide his own embarrassment, his silver eyes traveling away from the girl beside him. “What are *you* blushing about now? Idiot...” He mumbled weakly under his breath, looking away to hide his gaze.

AJ grinned and shrugged, looking as though she was holding back her amusement. “You are such a creep, Malfoy... I don't think that's ever going to change now is it? You seem to have a habit of seeing the worst in people all the time.” She pointed out, chuckling.

“Well, maybe but it's the truth! That bitch would screw anyone if it stood still long enough!” He defended righteously, trying to draw her attention away from what had just happened. AJ just rolled her eyes, smiling.

Draco had to smile as he caught sight of her rare, sincere smile, taking that moment to memorize every inch of her smiling face. /

*swear, the girl gets more goddamn beautiful everyday...* He thought to himself, shaking his head in disbelief and frustration.

“And forget about what Weasley said. You know it’s not true. You’re *not* a slut, you know. You can be such an annoying, indecisive bitch most of the time, yeah...But you’re definitely *not* a slut...” He said, winking.

AJ looked as though she was incredibly pissed off at first but surprisingly, she burst out into another round of hysterical laughter, shaking her head as she gave Draco a lopsided grin of gratitude.

“I’ve said it once, I’ll say it again, Malfoy. You...Are...Such...A...Jerk. But nobody ever said you were boring...At least you’re one of those few people who can make me smile *and* get pissed off at the same time...” She teased, nodding and raising a hand to brush back the lock of silver-blond hair that had fallen into Draco’s eyes.

Draco flinched slightly when he felt a sudden jolt of electricity emanate from her fingers to where she had touched him. His breath caught in his throat as he slowly raised his head and met her eyes with his in surprise.

AJ’s eyes had widened slightly as well so she must have felt it too, gazing at him with glazed, unreadable emerald eyes for a long moment. She dropped her hand immediately and met his gaze steadily again before offering a small, uncertain smile. *Fuck, my cheeks are flushed; Dammit...I must look like a blushing idiot...* Draco thought in annoyance, feeling the blood rise up to his cheeks.

“I’ll tell you something though, Draco... You may be ugly as hell but...You have very beautiful eyes... I’ve never really noticed them before but they are really quite tantalizing with that serious



expression in them... *Plain beautiful..*" She said softly, looking intently at his eyes.

"Quit lying, Potter. I know they're *not* beautiful. They're downright *weird*. Where the hell would you find someone with silver eyes?" Draco grumbled in reply. Draco felt his heart start to beat faster as she laughed softly again, amused at his answer.

"Yeah...You're absolutely right. They're not beautiful at all, they're ugly and weird and dull and lifeless. In fact, I can't tell which feature of yours makes you look ugliest most... But one of them has definitely got to be your weird, silver eyes." AJ answered sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

Draco glared at her for a minute, looking both annoyed *and* amused at the same time. "Okay, maybe they are a bit unique but still—"

"Draco, they're *beautiful*. I swear, even *I* could tell you that a girl could easily get entranced just by staring at them. I haven't seen anyone else in with eyes like that. You should appreciate it." She told him, raising a hand to stroke his cheek again.

Draco felt himself flush even darker as he unconsciously leaned into the tender caress, feeling his heart pound painfully in his chest. *This is crazy...Why am I blushing like this?! This is just AJ...I shouldn't blush in front of the girl whose argued with me for three years! This isn't right at all! What the hell happened to my charm?* He thought stupidly.

"I—I—Thanks..." Was all he managed to choke out, his voice cracking slightly. AJ's smile instantly melted away into an uncomfortable frown as she began fidgeting around in her seat, her face beginning to burn bright red once again.

"What are you blushing again for? Don't get it the wrong way...I *don't* like you *that* way...I just...I like your eyes...That's it... You're just like a brother to me you know....An extra annoying older brother." She kidded awkwardly, giving him an affectionate smile and punch on the arm as she promptly tried to ignore the squelching pain in her chest at her own false words.

Draco's smile faltered and his heart seemed to sink down in disappointment but he hid it with a confident sneer and rolled his eyes, forcing a disgusted look on his face. "Of course not, Potter. Do you actually think *you'd* have a chance with me? Ugly, skinny little annoying brats were never really my type anyway." He kidded lightly, feeling his heart clench painfully in his throat.

Before AJ could say anything else, Harry had barged into the compartment with a rather self-satisfied smirk on his face and rudely plopped himself down between AJ and Draco, forcing the two to move apart. Synonymous

Draco scowled at his best friend in irritation but Harry paid him no attention. *Perfect timing Potter...* Draco thought in irritation, muttering something under his breath as he rolled his eyes to himself.

"AJ, why don't you go over there and talk to Blaise? I just have something to discuss with Draco." Harry ordered, gesturing at AJ to move. AJ frowned at the order and the curtness of Harry's voice, fusing her eyebrows together.

"Why? Something you can't tell me as well? I'm your sister you know..." She asked, obviously offended. Harry rolled his eyes but gave her a reassuring smile.

"It's a guy thing. You wouldn't understand even if I told you. Now follow your big brother and go sit over there." He answered, raising both eyebrows at her. AJ sighed reluctantly, nodding in agreement.

"Fine." She said as she got up and walked over to her best friend. Draco frowned at Harry. "What the bloody hell do you want, Potter? You just had to go and interrupt other people's conversations now, did you? Idiot..." He complained, narrowing his eyes.

Harry smirked in amusement but he ignored Draco's comment and beckoned for the other boy to lean closer. "I just met up with Granger a while ago. That bitch is really in for it, she's not as difficult as you thought she would be." Harry said confidently with a sly smile.

Draco returned the smile with an assured grin. "I take it you scored some points with her?" He asked doubtfully, raising an eyebrow.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Just a bloody *kiss*. She was a fucking good kisser though, never expected that." He commented. Draco snorted derisively, shaking his head.

"Probably researches about kissing during her free time." He mocked causing Harry to laugh out loud in agreement. "However, I'm quite disappointed in you, Harry. Usually takes you only the first try to reel a chick in." Draco taunted, his eyes malicious.

"I'm just bidding my time, Draco. I'll get what I want soon enough. I'm sure of it." Harry swore darkly, raising a single eyebrow in intimidation. Draco just sneered and shook his head.

Sometimes, even he himself was intimidated by Harry's powerful sinister side. It was a trait in him that even their fellow Slytherin housemates didn't like encountering, which is why they all liked to stay on his good side. Harry Potter was not something they wanted to deal with.

"As long as you're sure, Potter." Draco said, his tone slightly disbelieving which caused Harry to glare at him momentarily.

"Ah, but would you mind if I take any side steps along the way? I hear Parvati Patil just broke up with her boyfriend." Harry asked suddenly, a wry, mischievous smile on his face.

Draco laughed in disbelief, shaking his head. "Potter, don't you ever stop?" He asked. Harry grinned. "Why would I want to?" He replied, winking slyly.

Their conversation stopped momentarily when Pansy plopped herself down on Harry's lap and wrapped her arms around him teasingly. "Hey Harrykins! Did you miss me?" She cooed, snuggling into Harry's neck.

Draco smirked at Harry from over Pansy's shoulder. "Dammit, Pansy, get the *bloody hell* off me! I'm not in the bloody mood right now!"

Across the room, AJ shook her head in disgust and revulsion, turning an interesting shade of green. “Doesn’t she ever get the idea that Harry doesn’t see her as anything else except for a plaything?” She asked Blaise. Blaise smirked at her, too busy reading his Quidditch book to pay much attention to what she was saying.

“Why would she? Besides, its not like being Harry’s ‘girl toy’ actually affects Pansy. I would think she wouldn’t mind it at all, anyway.” He answered directly, looking uninterested as they watched Harry trying to wrench Pansy’s overly eager and active claws away from groping him.

AJ sighed and watched as Harry shrugged helplessly at Draco and rolled his eyes at the ceiling, cursing out loud before he gave in and yanked Pansy roughly towards him just to give her what she wants for her to leave him alone.

Draco’s look of disgust mirrored Blaise’s as AJ rolled her eyes and dropped her head on Blaise’s shoulder to take a long, dreamless nap the rest of the way to Hogwarts.

**A/N:** In case any of you have noticed, I’ve edited the Draco/AJ conversation here a bit... I thought I’d add in a bit more teasing and insulting on their part to improve the storyline. Hopefully, you guys like the change. Anyway, **PLEASE REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 7- Too Hot to Handle

“Hey AJ, wake up!” Blaise whispered, nudging AJ awake as the Hogwarts express came to a complete stop. AJ squinted, forcing her eyes open and blinking up at the handsome face of her best friend, raising an eyebrow slightly in irritation.

“What is it Blaise?!” She snapped, slapping his annoying hand away. Blaise laughed at her grumpiness, rolling his eyes. “We’re here idiot. We better start changing into our Hogwarts robes.” He indicated, pointing to Harry, who had already slipped the black school robes on, the green Slytherin crest proudly displayed on his chest.

AJ groaned and lazily dragged herself into a standing position, reaching for her trunk to get her robes. Harry looked up and saw this, rolling his eyes. “Draco, Blaise, out of the compartment. My sister has to change into her school robes.” He ordered sharply, fixing AJ a stern glare.

AJ gave him a sheepish grin as Draco and Blaise walked out of the room, Draco looking flushed and embarrassed while Blaise just smirked in amusement. The only ones who had remained in the compartment were Harry and Pansy, who was still sprawled messily on the seats opposite AJ, sleeping noisily.

“You do *not* change in front of a guy, okay? *Especiall*y in front of a *Slytherin* guy! God, I would think at your age you’d know that by now.” Harry said derisively, shaking his head. AJ smirked as she carefully began slipping out of her muggle clothing and put on her school uniform before putting the black Hogwarts robes over herself.

Harry, who was sitting lazily on the seat beside Pansy, looked quite relieved when he saw her. "At least those Hogwarts robes are long. I don't have to worry about any perverts checking you out at school." He said, scowling.

AJ grinned and hopped onto her brother's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him a peck on the cheek. "Lighten up big brother. You know I'm capable of taking care of myself anyway. I'm a big girl; I know how to handle situations by myself." She assured him.

Harry didn't look convinced. "I don't think so... You tend to be a bit foolish most of the time." He scolded her in an authoritative voice. AJ looked very amused at hearing this, raising an eyebrow at her twin brother in response.

"Oh and what is this? I'm actually hearing this from you? Merlin forbid! The great and horrible Harry Potter is actually scolding his little sister! This will be in the Daily Prophet tomorrow!" She kidded in mock amazement, smirking.

Harry raised an eyebrow in mild irritation. "I do not find it amusing at all, AJ." He warned darkly. AJ quieted down instantly just as Draco and Blaise walked back into the compartment.

"You guys all set? The carriages to take us to Hogwarts are here. We better get going." Draco told them, grabbing his wand and stuffing it in his robe pocket. AJ immediately hopped off Harry's lap and began jostling Pansy awake.

“Ah, just leave her there. Let her wake up by herself.” Harry said carelessly, walking out with Draco, who had sniggered loudly at his comment. AJ saw Crabbe and Goyle join them outside and the four began to walk off, Harry and Draco in the middle, causing the students in the train to nervously move aside to make room for them as they passed by.

“Come on, AJ! Let’s get going!” Blaise snapped impatiently, checking his wizard’s watch.

AJ cursed at him in annoyance and shook Pansy again, more vigorously this time. “Pansy, wake up! Come on!” She hissed.

Pansy whined loudly but got up, scratching her head impatiently. “Why?! Are we here yet? Where did my Harry go?” She whimpered, pouting to herself.

AJ and Blaise rolled their eyes at each other. “Forget it. AJ let’s get going.” Blaise said curtly, dragging AJ impatiently out the compartment and out of the train.

“Hey! Wait up you two!” Pansy screeched, tearing after them and shoving some people out of her way in the corridor of the train.

“Hey, watch where you’re going Parkinson!” Seamus snapped at her as she shoved by him, Ron and Hermione. Pansy stopped momentarily, recognizing the voice and turning to sneer at the Gryffindor trio.



"You watch where you're going, Finnegan. In case you've forgotten, I'm a *Slytherin*." She said proudly, straightening up so he could see her Slytherin crest on her robes. Ron sniggered while Hermione just raised a single eyebrow but didn't say anything. "And I care because..." Seamus said sarcastically.

"Well, for your bloody information, we Slytherins are the most highly respected students in Hogwarts. You *Gryffindors*," Pansy started, saying the house name as though it was a disgusting word, "should learn to show more respect for us. You wouldn't want to anger a Slytherin." She said haughtily.

Hermione let out a derisive snort, not knowing whether to giggle or to be annoyed at the girl's hilarious comment. "Get lost Parkinson. We don't want to talk to a brainless git right now." She regarded coldly, trying to push past the other girl but Pansy stood her ground with narrowed eyes.

"What did you call me, Granger?" She demanded, flipping her hair over her shoulder haughtily. "She called you a brainless git. Now move, dammit!" Ron snapped impatiently, checking his watch.

Pansy's eyes widened. "I'm going to tell my boyfriend Harry that you guys are saying stuff like that about me!" She warned shrilly. Hermione visibly tensed and narrowed her eyes while Ron and Seamus pretended to look scared.

“Ooh, Harry! We’re so scared! She’s going to send *Harry* on us!” Seamus taunted in a high shrilly voice that was supposed to sound like Pansy.

“Well then tell your boyfriend that he better stay off our turf and mingle with his own kind. Maybe you ought to buy him a dog collar to keep him tamed.” Hermione retorted, her face scowling.

Pansy’s eyes flashed. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!” She demanded. Hermione just glared at her. “You figure it out Parkinson.” She replied.

“Why you good-for-nothing *mudblood*! I’ll have you know—”

“Pansy! Quit messing around with those losers and get moving!” AJ snapped, interrupting Pansy as she yanked the girl away from the Gryffindors. Pansy scowled again but let her friend drag her outside the train where Blaise, Harry, Draco and their other fellow Slytherins were waiting in a group for a carriage to take them up to Hogwarts.

“Hi Pansy, AJ!” Lila Perrine, another Slytherin girl in their year, ran up to them, her blond curls bouncing cheerfully below her shoulders. Draco paled at the sight of her and tried to hide behind Harry but Lila saw him there, giggling instantly.

“Hi Drakie!! Did you miss me?” She squealed, jumping into Draco and snuggling into him. Blaise and AJ started laughing loudly while Harry smirked at his best friend, who was trying to wrestle an overexcited blonde away from him.

“Agh! Lila get off me!” Draco protested angrily, trying to push her away from him but she only clung on tighter.

“Oh, Drakie! Can we ride up to Hogwarts together? I really missed you!” She whined, putting on a childish pout as Draco struggled wildly to prevent the girl from groping him then and there.

“Yeah, why don’t we ride with them Harry?” Pansy suddenly quipped, following Lila’s example as she jumped into Harry arms as well. Harry cringed and clenched his hands into fists.

Draco looked helplessly at AJ for help but she just gave him a smile and shrugged, causing Draco to scowl in annoyance. Both looking like they’ve eaten a flobberworm, Harry and Draco let Pansy and Lila drag them into a carriage which could only accommodate four. Crabbe and Goyle climbed into the next one with another Slytherin girl named Millicent Bulstrode and another Slytherin boy who was probably in a different year since AJ didn’t recognize him.

Blaise nudged AJ, grinning at her. “Looks like things are coming back to normal.” He said, shaking his head. AJ grinned back at him, winking. “Not quite. Something’s still missing...” She said with a playful smile.

Blaise looked at her in confusion. “Huh? What do you mean by that?” He asked her curiously. AJ just laughed and gestured to a couple of passing Hufflepuffs—Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones, who were both too busy giggling and talking to each other casually to notice the Slytherins watching them.

Blaise let out an evil smirk and with twinkling gray eyes, stuck his foot out in front of their path. Hannah let out a gasp as she tripped instantly and grabbed onto Susan's arm for support, causing both Hufflepuffs to fall to the ground. Blaise burst out laughing, making both Hannah and Susan to flush red and frantically pick themselves off the floor.

"You're such a jerk, Zabini!" Susan snapped at him, helping Hannah up who was wincing in pain and humiliation. Blaise grinned at her and winked, smirking at their annoyance. "Yeah I won't deny it but you forgot that I'm also a good-looking jerk." He said, winking.

Susan rolled her eyes and helped a blushing Hannah up, oblivious to the half-crushed, half-dramy look her best friend was sending towards the laughing Slytherin in return. AJ, who couldn't help giggling along with Blaise, finally rolled her eyes as well and yanked on his arm.

"Come on, let's get into a carriage. I can't wait for the welcoming feast, I'm starving." She said, pulling Blaise into a nearby carriage. Blaise scowled when they entered a carriage, which was already occupied by two other people, Parvati and Padma Patil, the only two other twins in their year.

Padma frowned at the sight of the two Slytherins, obviously not pleased, while Parvati looked extremely overjoyed, shooting the two Slytherins an overfriendly smile. "Hey AJ! Where's your brother?" She rushed out, looking at her expectantly as the horseless carriage started moving.

Blaise let out a derisive snort, giving her a sardonic sneer. "Can't you tell that he's obviously *not* with her?" He asked sarcastically. AJ however, ignored him, glaring coldly at Parvati in loathing and insult.

She hated it when girls asked her about her brother or asked her to help set them up with Harry. It made her feel so insignificant. It made her feel that she was only known to them as "*Harry's younger twin*" or something and other girls only made friends with her to get closer to Harry himself.

That was probably the reason she didn't make any female friends in other houses. She couldn't be too sure if they wanted to be friends with her because they actually liked of or if they wanted to be with her because she was Harry's sister.

Blaise probably realized AJ's sudden bitterness and squeezed her hand. This action seemed to jolt AJ back to her senses as she gave Parvati the infamous Potter sneer, shocking both the girl and Padma.

"Well Patil, did you ever consider that he's probably in another carriage or probably up at school already? You don't see him *here*, do you?!" She snapped impatiently. But Parvati wasn't the type to be put down easily as she nodded and flashed AJ another charming grin.

"Do you think that maybe you can help me out with him? I've kind of developed a sort of crush on him and I thought that maybe you can help me out in that department. I think we would make quite a cute couple don't you think?" She said, giggling.

AJ couldn't say anything back in anger as she eyed the girl up and down in absolute disgust and resentment. She felt herself shaking slightly with anger... A girl like Parvati Patil most definitely did *not* deserve her brother...

"Patil, you absolutely disgust me and I wouldn't set you up with my brother if you were the last girl on earth. Just stay the hell away from him okay? You don't stand a fucking chance!" AJ replied angrily, narrowing her eyes.

Parvati got the message this time as her jaw dropped open in anger and she seemed to flush in humiliation. Padma, however, looked amused by AJ shutting her twin's giggly fantasies up as she hid back a smile behind her hand.

"Fine! I didn't need your bloody help anyway! I'll win Harry over by myself." Parvati huffed, scowling as she looked away from AJ and gazed out the window moodily. AJ did the same, her scowl darkening in anger.

Blaise, who had watched the exchange between the two girls silently in amusement, then struck up a conversation with Padma, shaking his head at his best friend's moodiness.

AJ tuned out as Blaise began flirting with the other Patil twin, sighing and closing her eyes. Parvati certainly added a lot to making this a really bad day for her. She didn't need another giggly bimbo chasing after her twin. She had enough of those in her own house already.

Shaking her head, she sighed as she thought about what Ron had called her earlier. It had really hurt bad and up until now, she still couldn't quite get his mocking voice out of her head.

What she hadn't told Harry was the reason Ron calling her a "slut" the most was not because of the word itself but because it had been *Ron* who had called her such a thing.

*Does really think of me like that?* She thought dejectedly as she bit her lip. She took a deep breath and shut her eyes, trying to clear her head from all the thoughts she had inside.

"Pansy, get the *hell* off me! I'm trying to get down the damn carriage!" Harry snapped as he yanked his arm free from Pansy and climbed out of the carriage. Pansy just pouted and followed suit before again, reattaching herself to his arm with a proud, smug smile on her face.

Harry sighed in frustration but didn't bother pulling away anymore, letting Pansy drag him along like some kind of prized trophy. He walked over to where Draco was already standing behind the sixth and seventh year Slytherins, trying to move away from Lila as far as possible.

"Hey Harry, who's AJ riding with anyway?" Draco asked him, looking around for a trace of the other Potter twin. Harry looked around as well and was about to answer when he saw Hermione climbing out of a carriage after Ron, Seamus and Dean; causing him to smirk and walk over to them, Pansy still clinging onto his arm.

Hermione felt herself snarling as she glared at Pansy, who was smirking back at her with a smug smile, tightening her grip on Harry's arm.

"Hey Weasley! I believe I still haven't settled a score between you and myself." Harry said, narrowing his eyes at the Gryffindors. Ron glared right back, accepting the challenge the Slytherin had implied in his mocking words.

"I'd take you on any day, Potter." He replied, his form tensing in anticipation. Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them, her eyes wide and nervous. Harry was sneering at Ron in an evil manner while Ron glared right back resentfully, his ears slowly turning red in anger.

Before another fight broke out, she stepped forward and glowered at Harry. "Not here, Potter. Why don't you and your little dog of a girlfriend leave us alone?" She demanded.

Pansy gasped in insult while Harry barely heard Hermione's comment as he felt his lips curling into a small, self-satisfied smile. That had been his goal all along. He had wanted to irritate Hermione enough to see that enticing glare of hers.

Rather than intimidating him like it was supposed to, it just somehow intrigued and turned him on even more. It amazed him so much that she seemed to be the only girl he encountered who could resist him like that.



She was stronger than most of the girls Harry had gone after before. It was incredibly appealing. "Gladly, Granger. If Weasley and his little pal here agree to meet up with me later to settle the score between us. No one calls my sister such a foul word and gets away without spending a week in the hospital." Harry said gingerly.

Ron scowled at him, as Hermione seemed to melt under Harry's intense gaze. She was amazed that her friends didn't seem to notice how extremely uncomfortable and tense she was whenever Harry was around them. She knew that she was currently squirming around like some kind of five-year-old.

"You're on, Potter. We'll see who ends up in the Hospital wing." Ron retorted, raising his chin up defiantly. Harry raised an eyebrow briefly in acknowledgement.

"Astronomy tower. Tonight after the feast. If you're *man* enough, that is..." He said coldly before he turned and walked away. Pansy threw them all a superior smile before she flipped her glossy blonde hair over her shoulder and turned away.

Dean held Seamus back from lunging at the Slytherin girl in absolute anger and disgust. Hermione let out the breath she had been holding before Harry stopped abruptly and called over his shoulder.

"Oh, and Granger!"

Hermione flinched but looked up at him. "Watch your back. A snake will always be watching." He threatened, giving her an all-knowing

smile before he walked over to his group of Slytherins who were already making their way through Hogwarts.

Draco gave him sardonic smile as he narrowly dodged a water balloon Peeves had thrown at them in the hallway. "My, Potter. I believe you're taking my dare a little bit too seriously." He taunted, his eyes glinting.

Harry glared at him harshly, a water balloon missing him by a mere inch. "Of course I am, Malfoy. I *never* lose at challenges. I *thrive* in complication." He replied. Pansy and Lila looked back and forth between the two of them in confusion.

Draco looked suspicious. "Hmm...Is that right Harry? Perhaps you're enjoying this challenge a little too much..." He said, raising an eyebrow.

"Look, you gave this dare so don't mess with me on how I'm going to do it. I know what the *fuck* I'm doing, Malfoy." Harry spat out, narrowing his eyes.

Draco smirked in amusement but didn't say anything else as they entered the Great Hall. "Touché then, Harry." He said in a sing-song voice, chuckling. Harry stiffened in irritation but held it back as they made their way to their usual seat at the far end of the Slytherin table.

The younger Slytherins sitting there widened their eyes at the sight of the two of them and hurriedly scooted over to make room. "Let's just

drop it, Draco.” Harry snapped, sitting down at his usual seat facing the Gryffindor table, Draco sitting down beside him.

Before Draco could say anything else, Pansy spoke up excitedly, her eyes sparkling in anticipation. “Hey Drakie! You and Harry are going to beat up Weasley later!” She squealed, giggling. Draco looked at her in confusion as Harry let out a smirk in acknowledgement, nodding easily.

“Now you’ve done it, Pans. You spoiled the surprise. I wanted so much to tell Draco here about it.” Harry mocked, sniggering. Pansy giggled as Harry calmed down and told Draco about what had happened earlier. Draco’s silver eyes widened slightly, obviously excited.

“Count me in, Potter. I’ll be your second.” He said, grinning as he and Harry gave each other their secret handshake in affirmation. “Second for what?” Blaise asked as he and AJ settled themselves opposite Harry and Draco, next to Pansy.

Harry and Draco caught each other’s eye and shook their head at each other, sharing a hidden message with their eyes. Pansy, seeing this, took the liberty of answering for the two. “Nothing. So anyway, who did you guys ride with?” She asked abruptly.

AJ scowled and buried her head on her hands while Blaise smirked at her and answered for his friend. “The Patil twins. Apparently, AJ here had a little argument with Parvati Patil.” He told them, shaking his head in disbelief.

“What a bitch she was!” AJ grumbled to herself, rolling her eyes while the other Slytherins laughed. Harry, the only one who hadn’t laughed, looked at her silently with keen interest clearly in his eye.

“What *about* Parvati Patil? Did she really break up with her boyfriend?” He asked her. AJ glared at her twin in anger and suspicion but nodded slowly, narrowing her eyes at him.

Harry felt an evil smile creep into his face as he settled his gaze over at the Gryffindor table where Parvati and her friends were already sitting. However, instead of letting his gaze travel to Parvati, he somehow found himself staring at Hermione.

She was currently laughing at something Weasley was telling her, her beautiful coffee brown eyes sparkling with warmth and humor. Harry didn’t know why but he suddenly felt his hands clench themselves into tight, angry fists.

He just glared darkly at them, narrowing his eyes in pure, utter loathing, wanting nothing more than to stuff his shoe down Weasley’s throat. Ron saw this and just sneered back since he and his other friends were pretty much used to receiving death glares from the Slytherins, particularly Harry and Draco.

Hermione, however, flushed a dark red when she saw Harry glaring at her and began fiddling with the spoon and forks on her plate, moving her eyes around the room.

*I guess that stolen kiss is still in her mind...* Harry thought in amusement. She looked up and glared back at him defiantly, scowling. Harry gave her a low, sinister smirk, chuckling to himself as this seemed to piss her off even more and snap her head away.

The students quieted down as Prof. McGonagall entered the room, the new set of first year students following behind her, looking at the upper years in intimidation and nervousness.

Harry watched as McGonagall set the Hogwarts sorting hat on a stool in the middle of the room and explain to the first year students how they are to be sorted. Harry let his gaze travel over to the Staff table where he saw their headmaster, Prof. Dumbledore, who gave him a warm smile.

Harry felt himself giving him a small smile back in return. He never really knew why but he had always kept a big amount of respect for the old wizard, despite how he really despised all his other professors.

Maybe it was because Dumbledore was one of the very few people that Harry could actually trust without any apprehensions. He knew that despite being a powerful wizard, Dumbledore was a very noble man who lived up to his word, just as Harry did.

Moving on from Dumbledore, his gaze came to rest on the only other Professor he respected besides Dumbledore and that was Prof. Snape. Harry flashed his head of house a reckless grin which Prof. Snape returned with a fond smirk and nod in acknowledgement.

Harry smiled to himself. Everyone knew that Harry and Draco were Snape's favorite students. Aside from always receiving top marks at Potions, he and Draco have always shown great respect to Prof. Snape so Snape let them do whatever they wanted during his class.

The most amusing thing about Snape was the fact that he never punished Harry or Draco for anything they did wrong during his class. Sure, he would punish Blaise, Pansy, Lila and even AJ on some occasions but never Harry and Draco. He believed them to be his most prized students ever since their first year.

Moving on, Harry saw Prof. Trelawney, probably the professor he hated the most since she kept predicting his death in Divination every ten minutes. It never failed to give Lila and Blaise, who were both with him during Divination, a good laugh.

Draco didn't take Divinations with him since he and AJ had both signed up for Arithmancy during their third year. Harry hated to admit it but he was not as serious about his class marks as AJ and Draco were though despite this, he had always gotten a lot of good grades and he was always capable of performing hard spells that most high-marked students couldn't.

He just didn't have the patience to study too seriously. AJ and Draco were much more uptight than he was. Those two had even studied together on some occasions, forcing Harry to study along with them out of boredom.

There were a lot of other teachers Harry recognized as he scanned the staff table but one spot on the table particularly caught his eye.

The seat where Prof. Lupin, Harry's other favorite teacher, who had left last year, was empty.

Harry frowned in confusion, raising an eyebrow slightly in thought. *Weren't they able to find a new DADA professor this year?* He wondered but he didn't have much time to dwell on it when he jerked back to reality as the Sorting hat began to sing its usual, yearly song, causing the first year students to widen their eyes in amazement.

Beside him, Draco snorted derisively. "Oh joy...More useless idiots to overrun this petty school..." He muttered in a low voice, shaking his head. Harry hid a snigger, amused at his best friend's reaction to the first years' curiosity.

Draco had never been fond of first years that much, forgetting that he himself had been one not so long ago. Frankly, he thought they were all annoying and dense that he bullied them every chance he got.

Harry shook his head and watched as McGonagall began calling out the names of the students to be sorted. Within several minutes, Harry had yawned, clapping unenthusiastically as a small, blonde kid named Malcolm Baddock became a Slytherin.

Malcolm beamed and had situated himself right next to Draco who looked incredibly pissed off at being next to a first year. Harry smirked and shook his head, clapping again a little later when another boy named Graham Pritchard bounced over to their table enthusiastically.

He was about to ask AJ something when he suddenly felt eyes on him, causing his muscles to tense slightly. He looked up almost instantly and caught the eye of Parvati Patil, who was looking at him in a coy, flirtatious manner.

Not one to misinterpret an interested glance when he saw one, Harry curled one side of his lips into a seductive smile. Parvati blushed instantly and burst into faint giggles, making Harry's smile falter slightly.

*I swear, doesn't she do anything else but giggle?* He thought in irritation but waited until she had calmed down before he caught her eye again. This time, he gave her a wink, smirking suggestively.

Parvati giggled again but looked away coyly, tucking a strand of blond hair behind her ear. Right across from him, AJ gave her twin a disgusted snarl after she had witnessed the sight.

"Could you *not* do that?! I actually want to eat some dinner tonight!" She snapped angrily. Harry leered at her, widening his eyes in mock innocence. "I take it Parvati's not your favorite person right now." He said lightly.

"Harry, the girl just broke up with her boyfriend! Would you not make any moves on her yet?!" AJ demanded, looking incredibly irritated. Harry snorted in disbelief, shaking his head at her.

"Wishful thinking. I do what I want and when I want to. Besides, it's not like I'm actually interested in getting together with the girl." He told



her. AJ rolled her eyes and slumped at the table, obviously defeated once again. Harry had to laugh at his twin's resentment at his actions.

"You know what I want from the girl anyway and as soon as I get it, she's history." He explained to her, running a hand through his hair. Draco and AJ exchanged a look, shaking their head.

"Oh fuck off Malfoy! Stop pretending you haven't messed around with other girls in the past too. You're just as bad as I am." Harry snapped at him. AJ made a tutting sound, throwing up her hands in the air and turning away from the two of them to face the first years being sorted.

"You *both* make me sick! Vile, disgusting, sexist jerks!" She declared, rolling her eyes. Draco flushed darkly and glared at his best friend, who was looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Now see what you did?! Now that snotty little brat will have more of a reason to keep using that annoying phrase against me!" He hissed. Harry just gave him a mocking grin before he turned away again, laughing to himself.

"I swear, Parvati. You do not want to get involved with that guy. He is nothing but trouble." Hermione heard Lavender say to Parvati, who was sitting right across from her on the Gryffindor table.

Parvati made a tutting sound and rolled her eyes. "I know exactly what I'm doing, Lavender. I happen to know that Harry has a thing for

me. He was actually checking me out just five minutes ago!" She denied.

Lavender and Hermione both rolled their eyes, amazed at how dense their friend could be on most occasions. "Parvati, he checks *every* girl out! He comes onto any pretty girl he meets! Look how fast he dumped me the very next morning after I slept with him! He's just a bloody bastard who cares about no one but himself!" Lavender argued with her.

Parvati just looked bored, casually running a hand through her hair. "Well that was *you*, Lav." She said smugly.

"I'm pretty sure that I can get Harry Potter to fall madly head over heels in love with *me* and pretty soon, he'll become my loyal boyfriend. Imagine that..." She said, sighing dreamily as she gazed over at the sexy Slytherin.

"But think of his reputation, Parv! He has a record of being a playboy! What makes you think he doesn't see you just as he saw me? Take my word for it, he's a bloody *jerk*!" Lavender said, looking disgusted.

Parvati's eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at her best friend as though she had gone crazy. "Jerk? He's the sexiest and hottest guy in the year! Lav, he is probably the most eligible bachelor in the school! What can you *not* like about him?" She asked incredulously.

*The fact that he's a two-timing jerk and he's in Slytherin? Or how about his self-centered, arrogant personality? How he struts around*

*the school like he owns the whole bloody place or can it be how he acts so superior all the time?* Hermione thought to herself bitterly.

Fortunately however, Lavender seemed to have the same idea as she did. "How about how he acts as if the whole damn world revolves around his big empty head?" She snapped.

Parvati just laughed, amused at her friend's resentment towards the raven-haired Slytherin. "You don't have to be jealous, Lav. I know you still have a thing for him." She said knowingly. Lavender turned beet red, narrowing her eyes slowly in anger.

"I do not! I've gotten over him the minute I saw his true colors! You should do the same before you end up like me!" She warned. Parvati just shrugged carelessly, obviously no longer listening.

"Harry wouldn't do that to me. I'm the prettiest girl in the year! He wouldn't dare dump *me* that easily." She said confidently. Lavender sighed in defeat, shaking her head sadly at her.

"Fine. Believe what you want to believe Parv but don't say I didn't warn you." She snapped, turning away. Hermione scowled to herself and tuned herself out of their conversation. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop but they were just right across from her.

*What the hell was Potter really up to anyway?* She couldn't really understand if he liked any girl sincerely at all. Sure, she'll admit, she had sort of felt all warm and fuzzy inside when he saw his sweet and

affectionate side towards his sister but she was still angry at him for being such an insensitive jerk to everyone else.

She couldn't believe he had pulled that stunt on her on the train. Somehow, she felt like a traitor to herself because she had to admit that somehow, she had enjoyed the kiss. Her first kiss actually...

Hermione's eyes widened. *Harry Pretty-boy Potter was my first kiss?!* She realized in disgust. She shook her head to clear away the vile, disgusting thought. She couldn't really understand why he was coming onto her the way he was. In her opinion, she wasn't really classified into the kind of girls he went after in the past.

Harry went after the A-type girls. The girls who spent hours in front of a bloody mirror making sure they looked good. Girls like Lavender and Parvati, like Pansy and Lila, Padma and Cho. Girls who were stunningly beautiful...

*Why would he be interested in someone plain and simple like me?* Hermione asked herself, looking over at the Slytherin in question. Harry glanced up as though he had heard her silent question and caught her gaze.

He let his lips curl into a seductive smile before he turned away to talk to Draco, shaking his head slightly in obvious amusement. Hermione felt the blood rise up to her cheeks, as she turned away, embarrassed with herself for letting him see her looking at him. She didn't want to give him any ideas at all.

“Hey Hermione! You okay?” Ron asked her suspiciously, his forehead wrinkling in curiosity. Hermione cringed at the sound of her name. “Y-yeah, I’m fine Ron.” She answered shakily, not looking at him.

She could already imagine Ron’s reaction when she told him that she kept thinking about their worst enemy. Or even telling him that she had kissed Harry Potter, mouth-to-mouth!

She tensed at the thought. He would definitely be disgusted and downright furious! What more, Hermione felt so dirty and so traitorous to her friends because of that bloody kiss! She wished she could get it out of her head!

Sighing, she watched as McGonagall took away the sorting hat after all the first years had been sorted into their new houses.

*Darn, I was so busy thinking about Potter that I didn’t even realize the sorting ceremony was over...* She thought, shaking her head, ashamed of herself. She looked over to the Staff table where Dumbledore had stood up, the familiar twinkle in his eye, and gave them all a welcoming smile.

“Welcome back all of you especially our new first year students. Let’s all give them a warm, round of applause for welcome.” Dumbledore said cheerfully, clapping and encouraging the rest of the students to clap as well.

Hermione automatically felt her own hands begin clapping but she barely even acknowledged the first years at all. She just wanted to finish this feast and head off to go to bed. She just wanted to go to sleep at the moment.

She tuned out as Dumbledore began to announce some new rules and regulations to the students...Something about Mr. Filch prohibiting screaming Yo-yos, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs in the school and the Forbidden Forest and Hogsmeade Village being forbidden to second and first year students.

She had only come around when Dumbledore had suddenly announced something about the Quidditch match this year being canceled. There were a lot of disappointed groans and complaints from everyone particularly from the Slytherins, who were last year's champions.

"*What?!*" Blaise gasped out loud, causing a few other students to protest in agreement.

Blaise began yelling out furious complaints at the Headmaster while Harry and Draco had both gone into their silent, scowling mood.

Dumbledore seemed amused by this but held up his hand to silence them. "Now, now, all of you. The reason for this is due to a special event that will be taking place this school year. I assure all of you that you will find this event to be very exciting and very enjoyable. This year, Hogwarts will be hosting the—" He said,

He didn't get to finish his sentence as the Great Hall doors suddenly burst open. Everyone turned to see a cloaked stranger enter the Hall, a loud "Clank" with every step he took forward.

The figure walked up to the Staff table, removing his cloak, causing most of the students in the room to gasp. The man's face was a face unlike Hermione had ever seen before. Every inch of his face seemed to be marked with a scar, as his nose seemed to look like it was missing a large chunk.

The most hideous feature about him was probably his eyes or rather, his glass eye, which currently moving around without blinking looking somewhat like a machine.

His other eye was normal but still, rather strange since it was sharp and beady while his hair was dark gray and frizzy, looking as though it had been ages since a brush had run through it.

The man walked up to Dumbledore and shook his hand, talking to the Headmaster slightly before Dumbledore pointed the man up to sit at the Staff table which he did, his glass eye moving around, inspecting the students around him.

"Before anything else, may I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Moody." Dumbledore told them all cheerfully, breaking the stunned silence of the students in the room ever since Moody had entered.

"*Mad-Eye* Moody?!" Ron asked no one in particular as Dumbledore spoke up again. Hermione didn't answer as she stared at their new Professor in curiosity. Under the table, she could make out a carved wooden leg attached to where his other leg should be.

*So that's what had made that weird clanking sound...* Hermione thought, shuddering to herself.

"Anyway, as I said, Hogwarts will be hosting the TriWizard tournament this year with two other schools, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang and we shall be—"

"You're *JOKING!*" Fred and George Weasley both exclaimed in unison, causing a lot of their housemates to laugh in amusement.

"So that's what Malfoy and Potter were talking about!" Seamus whispered to Hermione.

Hermione smiled back weakly, nodding absently.

"No, I'm not Mr. Weasley. The TriWizard tournament started seven hundred years back as a friendly competition between the three largest schools in Europe, which are Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons." Dumbledore explained to them.

Hermione glanced around, noticing that everyone was starting to get excited about the news, forgetting all about Moody's shocking entrance.

"Each school would be selecting a champion to represent them in the tournament and that champion would be facing three different tasks. The three different schools alternate every five years on who was to



host it but the death toll mounted so high before that the Ministry banned the tournament from continuing.” Dumbledore told them.

“Death toll?!” Hermione gasped out loud. No one paid her much attention as they all began whispering and nudging each other in excitement. Even the Slytherins looked pretty excited as AJ kept nudging her brother but Harry just scowled at her in irritation.

“After years of trying to convince the ministry and making sure that no one is going to die this year, they have finally agreed for us to be hosting the tournament once again. The chosen students of both Durmstrang and Beauxbatons will be arriving in October so I do hope we all do our best to welcome them all to our school.” Dumbledore said cheerfully.

“What’s the prize?” Blaise demanded out loud publicly, causing AJ to elbow him sharply in embarrassment. Dumbledore chuckled. “I’m glad you asked that Mr. Zabini. The prize is the TriWizard cup along with the Glory of the school and a thousand galleons money.” He answered.

“I’m up for it!” Fred Weasley yelled out, looking extremely excited and intrigued by the announcement. “However,” Dumbledore said sharply, looking at both Weasley twins.

“The ministry and I have made sure that no one below age seventeen is allowed to enter so don’t bother submitting your name if you are not of age requirement.” Dumbledore told them, his blue eyes twinkling with humor.

Fred and George both began sputtering in outrage but Dumbledore continued on, not one to give in to their coming complaints.

“Well then, as I said, our guests will be arriving in October so I expect for all of you to show them a warm welcome. Those who are interested in joining, I shall be making further announcements about the tournament soon enough. Well, anyway, lets all eat then shall we?” He finished jovially just as the food began to appear on the food dishes in front of them.

Hermione sighed and reached over to help herself to some chicken. Next to her, Ron, Seamus and Dean were all engaged in an excited conversation about the TriWizard tournament, comparing who they wanted to be the Hogwarts champion.

“Who do you think the champion will be, Mione? I reckon it’ll be a Gryffindor.” Dean asked her, chewing on a piece of chicken as he spoke. Hermione gingerly wiped the bits of food he had sprayed on her when he talked, wrinkling her nose before shrugging.

“I’m not sure really but I think more or less he or she will be along the lines of Cedric Diggory.” She answered. Ron and Seamus both scoffed at her, laughing loudly at the idea.

“Pretty boy Diggory?! He’s almost as diluted as Potter is! What good can that brainless git do? *Smile* at his enemies?!” Ron said sarcastically.

"Yeah, I'm sure that'll do him a lot of good..." Seamus agreed, bursting out laughing and slapping Ron a high five. Hermione rolled her eyes at them, making a sound somewhat half-sigh, half growl.

"Hey, you know Hermione has got a point. Cedric is over the age limit and he is pretty smart." Dean defended her. Hermione looked at him as though he was crazy.

"*Pretty* smart?! Dean, he's the Head boy this year! He's extremely skilled in magic, he has a pretty darn good shot if you ask me!" Hermione told them. Ron and Seamus just raised an eyebrow at each other. Hermione was about to reprimand them but they were interrupted when a huge glob of mash potatoes flew across the room towards them and landed on Neville's head.

"Ten points! Did you all see it?! It hit him right in the face!" Blaise yelled out rudely in an extremely loud voice, jumping up from his seat in the Slytherin table and doing a wild, impressive victory dance in front of everyone.

The hall burst into laughter as Neville turned bright red, wiping his face in embarrassment. Seamus, being the one beside Neville, stood up abruptly in his defense and looked around from something to throw back at his offender.

Hermione looked back at the Slytherin table to see Blaise Zabini laughing the loudest among all the Slytherin students so it was obvious that he was proud of his doing. She saw both Harry and Draco smirking slightly beside him, both not laughing but looking incredibly amused.

"You *jerks*!! Can't you do anything else besides pick on us?! Don't you have a life?! Grow up!" Hermione yelled at them in anger as all the Slytherins seemed to snigger at her comment, a loud chorus of "*oohs...*" erupting from their table.

"No, it's okay. Forget about it, Hermione." Neville said timidly, wiping himself with a napkin.

"Aw... How *sweet*... Are you defending your wittle, squibby boyfriend, Granger?!" AJ yelled back sweetly at her, slapping Blaise a high five and laughing along with him.

Before Hermione knew what was happening, Seamus was hurling a piece of cake at Blaise's head in retaliation. Blaise's eyes widened as he ducked, the piece of cake missing him by an inch and instead hitting none other than Harry right in face.

AJ and Draco both burst out in hysterical laughter at seeing this while the rest of the Great Hall suddenly became deathly silent, everyone's eyes widening and tensing as they looked on in fear to see Harry's reaction.

Hermione couldn't help but hide a smile behind her hand as she saw Harry's normally perfect, handsome face smudged messily with chocolate cake.

Only AJ and Draco's laughter could be heard as the students heard a sound of a fork clattering on the floor before Harry slowly stood up from his seat, his eyes narrowing in a deathly slow motion as he carefully wiped his face.

AJ and Draco immediately stopped laughing and watched nervously as Harry's eyes blazed with intense anger and his hands clenched into tight, angry fists, one around his wand.

"Which one of you losers threw that?" He demanded coldly, leveling everyone with his infamous death glare. Nobody dared to answer him, all the students staring at the Slytherin in silence and nervousness.

"Who *threw* that?!" He demanded, this time much louder and sounding much more angry. The Hufflepuffs immediately pointed at Seamus, who backed away slightly but put on a brave face.

"Bad move Finnegan..." Harry said sneeringly as he wrapped his fingers around his wand, his facial expression completely emotionless and intimidating. Hermione watched in fear as Harry looked as though he was going to yell out a curse at Seamus any minute, in front of all the teachers.

She saw AJ tense up behind Harry and nudge Blaise sharply, whispering something to him. Blaise nodded instantly and jumped up from his seat, holding a roll of bread tightly in his hand.

“Food fight!!” He yelled out boisterously as he hurled the piece bread at Hermione. Hermione grunted as the bread hit her but she obliged by throwing another back, playing along with AJ’s plan.

The whole Great Hall cheered their agreement and soon, everyone had jumped up from their seat and were hurling food at each other, giggling and laughing as they did.

Their teachers raced around the room, trying to maintain some order within the students. Hermione had to laugh herself when she saw Ron hurling a huge cob of corn towards Malfoy, who expertly avoided it and hurled back a plate of pie towards him.

Unfortunately, Ron was too busy trying to aim for Potter again that he wasn’t able to avoid it the pie and ended up getting splattered on the face.

She watched as even the Ravenclaws began hurling food at one another and across the hall, laughing and joking around, rubbing the food into the other’s hair or face. She looked back across the room to see Harry still wiping his face clean from the chocolate cake but he was scowling at something AJ was telling him as she helped him wipe his face.

Both of them were trying to dodge the bits of food that would occasionally fly towards them once in a while.

Blaise and Seamus were still at it while Pansy and Lila were locked in a cake match between Parvati and Lavender. Hermione shook her head, amused. She was actually grateful that AJ had thought of a way to prevent her brother from getting into trouble like that.

*Imagine what Harry could've done to Seamus if ever...*

Hermione shuddered, not knowing if it was because of disgust of because of Potter's unbelievable sexiness but she was pulled out of her thoughts when she ducked again in surprise, the cupcake AJ had unexpectedly hurled at her missing her by an inch.

Hermione looked at her to see AJ looking at her in absolute hatred and...*jealousy*?! Hermione thought, surprised. *Why would the Slytherin princess be jealous of me?* She asked herself sarcastically in annoyance.

AJ just sneered at her before she turned her head away, rolling her eyes. Hermione felt her head spinning in confusion as she got up from her seat tried to walk out of the wild commotion of the Great Hall when she just about heard Prof. McGonagall's voice.

*"Zabini! Finnegan!* Detention for the both of you and ten points from Slytherin and Gryffindor! I'm ashamed at both you! The year hasn't even started yet and already you start losing house points!" She screeched, causing Hermione to turn around in interest.

No one in the Hall paid his or her Transfiguration Professor any attention as they carried on with the fighting, all laughing and squealing loudly.

"The rest of you, *CLEAN UP THIS MESS AT ONCE!*"

Hermione chuckled softly and walked out of the Hall, now knowing that another figure had followed right after her, moving in a slow, predatory pace with a smirk on it lips.

*A figure by the name of Harry Potter...*

**A/N:** Hehehe...I am so evil, aren't I? I thought I'd leave you guys with a cliffhanger for once... Well, that's that! I can finally go to sleep! yawns again Oh and of course, **PLEASE REVIEW! REVIEW! REVIEW!** Heheh.... MWAH! I love yah all!!



## Chapter 8- Playing with Fire

Hermione gasped in alarm as she felt a strong hand grasp her arm painfully and begin pulling her backwards in a rough, impatient manner. She opened her mouth to scream but before a sound had escaped her, a large hand had found its way to cover her lips. Hermione struggled in panic, scratching the arms of whoever was holding her and kicking violently but it was no use.

Her captor was just too strong. She was dragged, kicking and screaming all the way into the empty Transfiguration classroom where her captor loosened its arms around her and spun her around. Hermione tensed up instantly and prepared to yell out a hex from her wand when she saw two familiar, cold emerald orbs gazing back at her.

*“Potter?!”* She managed to choke out weakly; her heart pounding from both being scared half to death and from seeing Harry’s breathtakingly handsome features up close again. Harry seemed to smirk slightly, raising an eyebrow in amusement at her.

Before Hermione could say anything else, the Slytherin leaned forward and caught her lips in a fiery, heart-stopping kiss. Hermione felt her heart leap around in small circles as Harry’s lips caressed her own, his strong arms wrapping themselves around her delicate body and pulling her closer to him.

*What are you doing?! What the hell do you think you are doing?!* A voice inside Hermione’s head screamed at her but she couldn’t bring herself to answer it...Not when Harry was kissing her like that. It just seemed like the right yet so wrong thing to do at the time. She couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

Hermione's head began spinning as Harry deepened the kiss, kissing her with much more intensity and passion than she had ever felt before. Hermione felt her heartbeat increase to ten times its normal rate as she kissed him back with equal desire and fervor.

Hermione's arms found their way to Harry's neck, wrapping themselves around him and pulling him even closer. She trembled in his arms as her lips felt as though they were on fire as they kissed Harry's willingly, both of them feeling the passion the other felt.

*No! You have to stop this! You cannot kiss him! Do you have any idea what the hell you are doing?!* The voice inside Hermione screamed again. Though a bit reluctantly, Hermione yanked her mouth away from his and shoved him away from her as hard as she could.

However, Harry being the strong, athletic seeker he was, barely even moved at all. "Potter! What the bloody hell is your problem scaring me like that?! Are you crazy?!" She shrieked.

Harry looked annoyed, giving her another sneer of spite. "What the *fuck* is wrong this time, Granger?!" He snapped impatiently. Hermione looked at him as if he was mad.

"What's wrong?! I'll tell you what's wrong! You just scared me out of my wits, pulled me into McGonagall's classroom—where we're probably going to get caught—and you just *kissed* me! *Again*! You can't just go around kissing me like that whenever you want to! Who do you think you are anyway, Potter?! You're disgusting!!" She hissed, not wanting anyone to hear them inside McGonagall's classroom.

Harry just watched her in amusement, his eyebrow slightly raised.

“Woman, are you finished?”

“What do *you* think?!” Hermione screeched back. Harry let out a derisive snort, leaning back against McGonagall’s desk arrogantly and crossing his arms over his chest.

“If I recall, Granger, you were very much enjoying the kiss as well and if I were to point out all of my past experiences, there hasn’t been a girl that has turned me down before. You should consider yourself lucky I’m taking such a personal interest in you.” He said smugly.

Hermione clenched her hands and looked as though she was talking to a flobberworm.

“I swear Potter, you have got to be the most arrogant, self-centered jerk I have ever met! I don’t understand why some girls find you so appealing. It’s just plain disgusting! You know, not all the females in the world want to get into your pants!” She snapped at him.

Harry gave her a sardonic smile, chuckling to himself. “Yeah, I know. Only those who are straight.” He said, smirking at his own badly intended pun. Hermione made a noise somewhat half-scream of frustration and half-scream of disgust.

She couldn't believe she had actually thought she had seen something good in this guy! He was probably only civil to his sister but he was still the biggest asshole she had ever met!

"I don't even know why I'm wasting my time with such a jerk! I swear, don't you ever come near me again, Potter!" Hermione snapped, turning away and heading for the door.

Harry yawned calmly behind her and pointed his wand at the door, whispering a spell. Instantly, the door swung shut and locked itself. Hermione groaned and tried to pull out her wand to whisper an unlocking spell.

"They won't work. It's a special locking spell that Draco and I invented in our third year. Only the caster can remove it." He said smugly, leaning back from where he now sat on the teacher's table and watching in amusement as Hermione furiously tried to cast all the unlocking spells she knew.

"Darn it! Let me out right now Potter!" Hermione demanded, glaring at him as she collapsed on one of the classroom chairs. Harry jumped off McGonagall's desk and sat down in front of the Gryffindor.

"Why do you always think so badly of me, Granger? I'm heartbroken..." Harry mocked as he gave her a charming smile. Hermione made a tutting sound, not at all amused by his charms.

"You know why! Why *wouldn't* I think badly of you?" She retorted resentfully, yanking her hand away when Harry tried to reach for it.

Harry couldn't help chuckling again, the low, sexy sound sending shivers down the Gryffindor's spine.

"Well, let me think. I'm Harry Potter, the boy-everyone-wants. I'm popular, feared, powerful, athletic and *fucking* gorgeous. Need I say more?" He asked, raising both eyebrows at her mockingly.

"You're also a stupid Slytherin git who thinks of no one else but himself." Hermione responded coldly, not giving in to him.

Hermione couldn't help herself. She felt like breaking Harry's perfectly handsome face once again as the Slytherin let out another amused laugh, shaking his head at her frustration.

"I thought so...Why is it so hard for you to accept that I'm actually interested in you?" He asked her, amused.

"Because, Potter, I know your reputation. You're known to the whole school for being a damn playboy and Merlin knows how many girls have made the mistake of falling for you have ended up being humiliated!" Hermione hissed.

Harry just looked back at her calmly, the smile never leaving his lips.

"Plus, after all those horrible stunts and tricks you and Malfoy pulled on us Gryffindors before in the past, all the nasty things you say about us, for everything you Slytherins always do to everyone else and of course, who can forget that you have a reputation of lasting

less than one week with a girl! There is no way that you are getting me to fall for that overused ploy of yours. I'm much more different than the other girls you've nailed." Hermione said coldly.

Harry didn't react but instead, stood up and walked behind the chair Hermione was sitting on, putting both his hands on her shoulders and leaning down to whisper something in her ear.

"That's *exactly* why I find you so appealing, Granger... You're much more different than they are..." He whispered, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear for her. Hermione tensed, not liking the idea of having Harry this close to her. He chuckled, sensing the girl's discomfort and leaned over to whisper something again.

"You don't have to be afraid, Hermione...I know that you're not used to dealing with guys like me... You've been around those *boys* in your house too long. You deserve so much better...It's about time you've experienced being with real *men*..." Harry murmured into her ear, sending a chill down Hermione's spine.

"My friends in the Gryffindor are ten times the men you Slytherins will ever be, you bastard!" Hermione hissed, clenching her hands tightly. Harry lifted his lips into a small smile, gently starting to massage her shoulders as Hermione squelched the gasp that had almost escaped her throat.

"You think so low of us Slytherins already, *Hermione*... Didn't you ever consider giving me a chance...? I can be way more...*gifted*...than those Gryffindor friends of yours will ever be..." Harry taunted seductively, his green eyes glittering in mischief. He leaned forward to whisper something to her again. Hermione shut her

eyes in nervousness and cursed herself under her breath for being so weak.

"You can't hide from me forever Granger. You'll come around. I guarantee it." He hissed.

His lips brushed against her cheek in a soft, lingering kiss before he pulled himself away from her abruptly.

Hermione barely had time to react when he casually readjusted his robes once again, dusting them as though nothing had happened and headed for the door, flicking his wand carelessly over the lock and walking out, his black robes swishing dramatically behind him.

As soon as his carefully measured footsteps began to fade away, Hermione let out the shaky breath she had been holding and buried her head in her hands on top of the desk. She hated to admit it but Harry was indeed getting to her and she was afraid that if she didn't get her act up together, she might be drawn in to his charms

She was finding it a lot more difficult to resist his urges now that her crush for him seemed to have intensified even more.

Hermione sighed and got up from the desk, shakily making her way back to Gryffindor tower. Somehow, she had a weird feeling that that wasn't their last encounter. *Boy...* She thought as she entered the Gryffindor Common room.

*Harry Potter is one tough opponent... I hope I'm not heading for a losing battle...*

"Ron! Are you sure you really want to go through with this?!" Seamus hissed as he pointed the beam of light from his wand at Ron's bed where Ron was hastily looking around for his new wand. Ron threw him a reckless grin, making sure that Dean and Neville were both asleep.

"Sure, I'm sure! Why? Don't tell me you're getting cold feet Finnegan! It'll be a great chance for us to kick both Potter and Malfoy's butts!" He said. Seamus groaned and got to his feet, putting out the light of his wand.

"But what if we get in trouble? And don't you think Mione will get mad at us again for fighting?" He pointed out, reluctantly following Ron out of the room to the Gryffindor Common room.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her, right? Besides, I don't want her going. She might get hurt or something. She's a *girl*." Ron said as he led the way outside the portrait hole into the empty corridor. Seamus sighed in defeat, feeling nervous as they walked through the empty, deserted corridors.

"Well okay but I really don't know about this..." He whispered as the two Gryffindors briskly made their way up to the Astronomy tower.

"Quit worrying, Seamus! Everything will be fine, I'm sure of it! It's not like we can't handle a pair of bigheaded, two-faced jerks anyway...It'll



be fine.” Ron assured, giving his best friend an encouraging grin. They stopped abruptly when they reached an abandoned corridor where Mrs. Norris, Filch’s annoying pet cat was sauntering through.

“Quick! Hide!” Ron hissed. The two Gryffindors ducked into the nearest broom closet, holding their breaths as the annoying cat passed them. When the two were sure that Mrs. Norris was gone, Ron shakily let out the breath he had been holding and gave Seamus a grin.

“See? Nothing to it. This will be a piece of cake.” Ron said, laughing nervously as he and Seamus continued on walking. Seamus shot him a death glare, inwardly cursing why he was always such a good and loyal best friend.

“What?! We’ll go up to the astronomy tower, kick Potter and Malfoy’s behinds and sneak back in Gryffindor tower as if nothing had happened. What could go wrong?” Ron said.

“Well, those two Slytherin prats could be the ones kicking our behinds, for one! Most students do fear them for a reason, Ron!” Seamus pointed out irritably.

“Exactly! But we’re not like other students. We’ll get the better of them and prove once and for all to everyone that we are much better than those two gits.” Ron enthused as they reached the Astronomy tower.

The two looked around in confusion. “Er... Where are they, Ron?” Seamus asked him flatly, raising an eyebrow at him expectantly

Ron scratched his head and scowled, looking around the room again. "I know Potter told me to meet him here so they should be arriving any minute." Ron said as he lazily leaned against the wall.

"I really hope you know what you're doing..." Seamus mumbled, shaking his head. "Relax Seamus. Everything is going to be fine." Ron told him firmly, confident smile on his face

"You wish, Weasley." A cold, drawling voice said from the darkness, causing the two Gryffindors to jump in surprise. They heard the sound of soft laughter from the shadows.

"Aw, what's wrong? I thought you Gryffindors were supposed to be brave and all that fucked up nonsense..." The voice said again as it stepped out of the darkness towards them.

"*Lumos.*" Ron muttered, causing a single beam of light to emanate from his wand. He shone it in the face of the person, finding himself scowling at the handsome, sneering face of Draco Malfoy.

"Shove off, Malfoy. Where's Potter?" Ron asked coldly as Draco lazily flicked his wand, causing a dim glow of light to fill the dark room. Ron scowled even more put out the light of his wand—obviously not needing it anymore.

Draco yawned and leaned back against the wall in a confident manner, lazily glancing around. "He'll get here Weasley. He just had

to take care of some...*personal* matters..." He said, giving them an *I-know-something-you-don't* smile.

"What the hell do you mean by that Malfoy?" Seamus asked sharply, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. Draco chuckled to himself, lazily cracking his knuckles. "That's my little secret Finnegan... I mean, it's not like *you* go blabbing Weasley's secrets here now do you?" Draco said casually, raising an eyebrow.

"Well then that leaves you in a pretty difficult situation then, huh Malfoy?" Ron taunted, a threatening smile on his face as he and Seamus cornered Draco against the wall. Draco's silver eyes flickered with panic for a moment before he narrowed them again and sneered.

"I don't think so Weasley. You see, unlike you and Finnegan here, I can handle stuff on my own." Draco returned, stepping forward and positioning himself right in between Ron and Seamus, his wand in his hand.

Seamus and Ron threw each other a sneer, both of them with pleased looks on their faces. "Really? Well, we'll see how good you are when you take on the both of us at the same time." Seamus said, cracking his knuckles.

Draco raised an eyebrow, looking at the two of them scornfully. "So... We're doing things the muggle way then, are we?" He asked resentfully.

“How about both, Malfoy?” Ron said, narrowing his eyes in challenge at the Slytherin. For a minute, Draco hesitantly took a step back as both boys advanced on him, not knowing which boy to attack first.

Then, famous Malfoy sneer in place, he lunged forward and punched Ron right in the jaw, causing the redhead to wince and stumble back in pain. Seamus lunged forward, ready to attack Draco from behind as the Slytherin was still looking at Ron when he felt a hand violently pull him back and slam him against the wall.

“I’ve never had much respect for people who attack a man from behind.” Harry said coldly, slamming Seamus into the cold wall again, his emerald eyes blazing with anger and disgust.

Draco turned around and gave him a grateful grin, obviously relieved at his impeccable timing. “Glad you could make it, Harry.” He greeted, a smirk on his face as he dodged a furious punch from Ron.

“I’m sorry for the delay, Draco. I had some *lioness* hunting to do...” Harry said, aiming a punch at Seamus again. The Gryffindor doubled back in pain, the wind knocked out of him. Draco snorted, catching on to the secret meaning of what Harry had just said.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, Potter?!” Ron yelled furiously, launching himself at Harry but the raven-haired Slytherin dodged it and shoved Ron away, causing him to slam into Seamus painfully.

“That’s none of your fucking business, Weasley. Now why don’t we settle this the Wizard way? Obviously, you’re not doing any good right now anyway.” Draco said darkly, pulling out his wand again and pointing it at Seamus.

Seamus’ eyes widened. “Now just the what the hell are you—“

“*Serpensortia!*”

Seamus let out a surprised yelp as a huge snake appeared out of nowhere in front of them and started hissing dangerously. Seamus gulped and backed away slowly, the snake slowly following right after him.

“Seamus! Be careful!” Ron yelled at him in worry.

“Look familiar, Weasley?” Draco taunted, watching with keen interest as the snake hissed some more, stalking Seamus until he had backed up into a wall.

Ron lunged at Malfoy and began to punch him repeatedly, yelling out insults at him while Draco immediately fought back, both boys dropping their wands on the floor. Harry barely paid them attention as he trained his eyes on the snake, steadily speaking out some *Parseltongue* words to the giant snake with an evil smile on his face.

Ever since he had met that snake back when he was eleven years old at the zoo his muggle relatives had taken him to, he had developed an intense liking and friendship with snakes.

Hell, it even intensified even more after his second year when he learned that he had the very rare, yet also very dark ability to converse with snakes. He had taken a liking to talking to snakes from then on. It was the mark of him being a true Slytherin and he was damn proud of that ability and that identity.

“Don’t you kill the boy... Just frighten the moron out of his wits... Circle around him...Circle around him...” Harry hissed in parseltongue, the malicious expression on his face causing Seamus’ eyes to widen in fear.

“What the hell are you telling it to do, Potter?!” He yelled as the huge snake began to circle around him as Harry had ordered, biting at his heels to scare him. Harry smirked evilly and watched in satisfaction as Seamus pointed his wand at the snake.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” He cried out nervously but the snake just dodged it easily. “*Stupefy!*” Seamus yelled out desperately but again the spell missed, the snake merely giving a silent hiss in response.

“Potter! Stop this! It isn’t funny anymore!” Seamus yelled at him.

“Oh, but it is, Finnegan! Funniest thing I’ve seen all damn day! Though I’m betting the funniest thing you’ve seen all day was when

you threw that bloody piece of cake at me, wasn't it?!" Harry retorted, his eyes narrowing in fury.

Seamus' eyes widened as the snake's circle seemed to grow smaller by the minute, trapping him right in the middle. "I swear Potter, that cake was for Zabini. I had no idea it would end up hitting you!" He said.

Harry raised an eyebrow and casually glanced over to his best friend who was now kicking at Ron, who was on the floor, breathing in pain. "Hey Draco! Hold on a minute, could you watch Finnegan here? I need to talk to Weasley." Harry said, walking over to where they were.

Draco shrugged carelessly and walked back to the snake as Harry leaned down and grabbed a fistful of Ron's robes, pulling his face up to meet his.

"I'll only say this once, Weasley so you better listen and listen good." Harry said darkly, his eyes glinting. Ron snarled at him but looked as though he understood what Harry meant.

"If you ever insult my twin sister again, I swear, I will hurt you so bad; it will make *Salazar Slytherin* himself hang his head down in shame. Do you understand this?!" Harry hissed, tightening his grip.

Ron spit at him, making Harry freeze abruptly and wipe his face in disgust. "Go to hell, Potter! I'll insult your slut of a sister anytime I want to! She's not worth defending anyway!" He snapped.

Harry tensed up again and looked away for a moment, muttering to himself, before he snapped his head back and punched Ron again...hard.

"I am telling you, Weasley. You better watch your mouth. You wouldn't want to face my wrath. I may be Harry Potter, the bloody *boy-who-lived* but I know a good deal of dark curses and spells. You wouldn't want to challenge me." Harry threatened darkly.

Ron's eyes widened in rage and disgust, staring at Harry as though the Slytherin had just admitted to being a death eater." I always knew you were a dark wizard, Potter. Those Hufflepuffs were all probably right when they called you the heir of Slytherin!" He spat out.

Harry laughed in amusement, his eyes glinting maliciously in the darkness. "Of course not Weasley. I just happened to take an avid interest in reading some dark arts books I found in the library last year. Helped me a great deal to think of ways to kill Voldemort." He said in a mocking cheerful tone.

Ron cringed at the mention of Voldemort's name but he looked at Harry in utter loathing. "I never thought that the *respectable, heroic and noble* boy-who-lived would ever stoop low enough to learn the dark arts." He muttered in disgust. Harry gave him a smile, shrugging casually in response.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with learning dark magic as long as you know how to use it, Weasley. I've found it very useful on my behalf. It



takes dark magic to kill a damn asshole with dark magic, anyway.” He said.

Ron didn’t say anything but instead, he attempted to punch Harry again but Harry caught his fist midair and punched him instead.

“Well, I can’t say how much I enjoy these fun little chats of ours Weasley but Draco and I must get going. After all, it’s the first day of class tomorrow right?” Harry said cheerfully, shoving Ron back against the floor and walking back over to Draco, who had made the snake disappear and was locked in a fist fight with Seamus.

“Come on, Malfoy. Let’s get going. We’ve played with these *boys*, long enough.” Harry said, putting his wand back into his pocket. Draco smirked at him in agreement and put Seamus back down on the ground.

“Nice playing with you.” Draco acknowledged, clapping Harry on the back before the two Slytherins walked out of the room. Seamus grimaced and went over to help Ron back up his feet, both of them bruised and battered.

“Those nasty Slytherin bastards.” Seamus muttered angrily, dusting his robes clean. Ron couldn’t even respond, muttering to himself as he wiped off a trickle of blood had run down his jaw. “Damn Potter and Malfoy... They always seem to find some way to turn things against us. I hate them both...” Ron raged, punching a nearby wall violently.

Seamus shook his head and sighed, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. “I told you this wouldn’t turn out good. Ron,

this is Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy we're talking about! Are you sure we should be messing with them like this? I mean, I hate them too but—"

"Are you saying we can't handle them?!" Ron interrupted, glaring at Seamus in challenge.

"Of course not but I'm just saying we should watch our backs every now and then because—"

"We don't have to be intimidated by them or anyone! They're nothing to us!" Ron yelled at him, storming out of the room. Seamus sighed again and followed after him.

"Why are you so intent so being better than the two of them, anyway? Why have you always been obsessed with being better than the Slytherins?" Seamus asked him as they weakly made their way back to Gryffindor tower.

Ron growled but said nothing until Seamus raised an eyebrow at him in persuasion. A long moment of silence passed between them until Ron finally gave in.

"Oh fine! I just—I've never actually been the same ever since that time in first year when..." Ron's voice trailed off slightly as his eyes narrowed themselves.

Seamus, however, answered for him, knowing his best friend well enough to know the reason behind his actions. "The time when Potter accepted Malfoy's hand of friendship?" He asked warily, looking at the other boy intently.

Ron rolled his eyes and nodded, glowering silently to himself. "I've grown to hate Potter ever since... Sometimes though... I couldn't help wondering...How things would have been like if Harry had been my friend instead of Malfoy's. I had so much respect for him before... I guess his true colors just finally shined through." Ron muttered as they rounded a corner.

"But Ron, didn't you ever think that Harry and Malfoy are friends for a reason? They're exactly alike! If you had become friends with that scar-faced jerk, who knows? You may have become a jerk too or something...That's be horrible." Seamus pointed out, shuddering at the idea.

Ron sighed in reluctant agreement, shrugging dismissively. "Yeah... I guess... It's just because of them that I've always felt so low about myself... And the bad part is, I have to deal with *two* Potters, *both* in Slytherin, *both* who hate me and *both* who are nasty gits." He said, shaking his head.

Seamus snorted derisively, looking amused. "I take it you see AJ as a problem too, eh?" He asked. Ron raised an eyebrow, looking irritated at his comment.

"Of course I do, Seamus. She's a spoiled, self-centered brat who seems to go out of her way to ridicule me!" Ron pointed out irritably. Seamus smirked, giving him a teasing, knowing smile.

“Aye...Didn’t you ever think that maybe she likes insulting you so much because she fancies you, mate?” He teased. Ron’s ears turned red.

“AJ Potter?! Fancy me?! I don’t think so, Seamus! That is not likely!” He cried out defensively, flushing. Seamus laughed as they entered through the portrait hole and collapsed on a couch in the Gryffindor Common Room.

“Why sound so alarmed, mate? Hell, I’d be glad as hell if AJ Potter fancied *me*! She’s a very beautiful gal!” He reasoned, grinning. Ron turned even darker, shaking his head frantically at him.

“That’s not the point, Seamus! She and I... We don’t match at all! Even if I liked her too, there is no way...” He declared. Seamus just laughed again, obviously not listening to a word of defense Ron was saying.

“You git... You *do* like her too, don’t you?!” He teased, grinning when Ron cursed under his breath, shaking his head. Ron groaned and buried his head in his hands, wincing in pain as the bruise on his left cheek from Potter stung again.

“Not this again... What a night... First, I get beaten up by my worst enemy then my best friend starts to tease me with my enemy’s sister...” He mumbled. Seamus raised an eyebrow, rolling his eyes at him.

“Why is it so hard for you to admit that you have a thing for AJ, mate? It’s quite obvious, actually.” He said. Ron’s head snapped back up, his eyes wide with embarrassment.

“It is?! What the hell do you mean by that?!” He demanded. Seamus grinned, winking at him. “Well, maybe it’s because of the way your eyes seem to check her out from head to toe every time you see her.” He teased.

Ron groaned again, sighing loudly. “I didn’t mean for anyone to see that... I’m still a guy you know... And she’s still a girl...Even if she *is* in Slytherin...” He defended. Seamus was still sniggering at him, his eyes twinkling with laughter.

“Got to hand it to you mate, you’ve got a fine choice there. AJ Potter! Hehe... The princess of Slytherin... Harry is going to *kill* you...” He said, laughing. Ron glared spitefully at him, clenching his hands in anger.

“What? Its true! That’s the whole bad part of another house dating those damn Slytherins. Their housemates will criticize everything they can about you until you eventually end up breaking. They prefer to mingle with their own kind.” Seamus said.

“And that’s exactly why you should understand that I do *not* fancy AJ. There is just no way. You have any idea how many barriers there are between us?” Ron pointed out, almost glumly.

“Ah, don’t worry about it mate. By the way she’s looking at you, I’m pretty sure she’s interested too.” Seamus told him, winking. Ron rolled his eyes, causing him to wince in pain again.

“Damn it! I’m going to the hospital wing! Every part of me is aching! Stupid Slytherin gits!”

“AJ! Wake up! Today is the start of class!” An annoyingly perky voice rang through AJ’s ears the following morning, causing her to jolt awake in surprise. Groaning, AJ just mumbled something in her sleep and rolled over, pulling her green blanket over her head and trying to fall back asleep.

“AJ! Come on! Wake up!” Pansy persisted, shaking her awake.

“Agh! Bitch! Sod off!” AJ snapped impatiently, yanking the blanket tighter around herself and roughly slapping Pansy’s hand away.

Pansy sighed in exasperation and looked helplessly back at Lila and Millicent, who were already fully dressed in their Hogwarts robes as she was, watching the scene with amusement.

Waking AJ up in the morning was always the most difficult task all three Slytherin girls had to face. Right after that was having to deal with AJ’s annoyingly grumpy attitude in the morning. She wasn’t a morning person, *that* was for sure.

Once, she had even cursed a younger Slytherin student for accidentally waking her up when she was napping in the Common Room. The only person who could actually wake her up without any fear was Harry since of course; he was pretty used to handling his sister's grumpiness all the time.

"AJ, come on! We're already late for breakfast! You're the only one we're waiting for anyway! Look, we're all dressed! You should be used to this by now!" Lila told her, shaking her again.

"I said get the hell away from me dammit! Leave me alone you annoying bitch!" AJ snapped. Her eyes still shut; she raised a hand and blindly slapped Lila hard on the cheek, causing the girl to shriek in pain and stumble backwards in shock.

Pansy and Millicent both burst out laughing at the scene as Lila glared daggers at AJ in hatred, her face twisted into an ugly scowl.

"AJ at it again?" A male voice asked from behind them, startling all of them for a moment. They all turned to see Blaise walking into the room, an amused smile on his handsome face.

Pansy rolled her eyes, sighing in exasperation. "The usual. I swear, this girl gets worse everyday. Can *you* wake her up?" She asked. Blaise winced at the idea of attempting to wake the female Potter twin, giving them all a sheepish smile.

"No. Hell, even I can't get this damn bitch to wake up properly. We even had a hard time ourselves waking up her brother earlier. These two are like fucking *royalty* or something." He said, shaking his head.

“At least Harry actually does wake up sooner or later and isn’t as impossible as AJ is!” Pansy said, shaking the girl again.

Blaise smirked as Pansy dodged a slap from his sleeping best friend, who had let out an annoyed grunt of irritation. “Fine. I’ll go get Harry to wake her. ” He said, walking out of the room.

“I’m heading off the breakfast, you guys. Good luck.” Millicent said, laughing slightly as she walked out of the room.

“I’m going with her. I won’t wait for *ms. princess* here to wake up.” Lila said, rolling her eyes and following after.

Pansy groaned and hurried after them in a run to catch up. Several minutes later, Blaise walked back in, Harry and Draco both following behind him, both fully dressed in their Hogwarts robes. Harry looked annoyed as he began roughly shaking the sleeping lump of blankets that was his twin awake.

“Goddamit! Go away! Leave me alone!” AJ screamed at him as she tried to slap him blindly again but Harry expertly caught her hand in midair and yanked her blanket off her.

“AJ, you are waking up whether you like it or not.” Harry snapped back, yanking his twin from the bed. Draco and Blaise began to laugh as Harry hoisted his protesting twin up easily on his shoulders and easily carried her to the bathroom.



“Harry! You smarmy prick! Put me down!” AJ screamed, kicking and screaming at her brother. Harry didn’t listen as he put her down and shoved her, still kicking and thrashing around, into a shower stall and turned on the water cold blast.

AJ cursed out loud, letting out a growl of frustration as her eyes snapped open instantly at the blast of cold, immediately getting drenched by the shower.

“Fuck! That’s *cold*! Damn you, Harry! I’m still wearing my nightgown!” She cried out but Harry didn’t listen to her as he walked out of the bathroom and shut the door behind him, cutting off his sister’s protests.

“Well, that’s that. Let’s get going, Draco. I’m starving.” Harry said, walking out of the room cheerfully. “I’ll wait for your sister, Harry.” Blaise said, still laughing at their antics earlier.

Harry smirked, nodding and walked off with Draco, who was still shaking his head. Fifteen minutes later, AJ was muttering to herself grumpily, still yawning occasionally as she and Blaise made their way to the Great Hall for breakfast.

She yawned again and plopped herself down on the Slytherin table next to Draco, Blaise sitting beside her. “Good morning, AJ.” Draco greeted her, offering her a piece of toast.

“Morning.” She mumbled, taking it and biting into it moodily, glaring at the table in annoyance. Blaise and Draco exchanged smirks.

“Don’t mind her, Draco. She woke up the wrong side of the bed again, this morning.” Blaise said, rolling his eyes as he helped himself to some breakfast. AJ gave them both a death glare before she rolled her eyes. However, she had to admit that Blaise was right.

*Imagine waking up to find yourself in the shower with cold water...* She cursed under her breath. Sometimes she just didn’t like having Harry Potter as her brother, more so as a *twin*.

However, she felt her heart jump into her throat when she saw Ron enter the Great Hall, laughing at something Hermione and Seamus were telling him. Harry, who was also watching them, tensed slightly as he watched Hermione.

AJ stared at Ron for a moment before she snapped to her senses and replaced her lovesick glance with a hateful glare, sneering at him like a normal Slytherin would to a Gryffindor. Ron caught her gaze and obliged with his own hateful glare at her. However, AJ raised an eyebrow in question.

*Why does Ron have a bruise on his cheek?* She wondered, looking at him. She shrugged it off, shook her head, deciding it was probably not something important very much.

She dropped her gaze and sighed. Maybe that would always be how they would look at each other—with loathing and hatred. He would

never see her as something else rather than AJ Potter, Harry's annoying sister and one of his Slytherin enemies. She was longing for the impossible.

She glumly began playing around with her food, muttering to herself when she was brought out of her trance as a single red rose was placed in front of her. She smiled and looked up to see Draco looking at her with a small smile, blushing almost shyly.

*Wait a minute...Shyly?! Draco doesn't-shut-his-mouth Malfoy?? Nah... It couldn't be.* She thought incredulously as she took the rose and smiled at him.

"Thanks Draco. What brought this on?" AJ asked him, caressing the soft flower gently. Draco smiled, surprisingly causing AJ's heart to jump slightly but she ignored it.

"Well, I just thought that giving you a rose would help bring you out of your grumpy, bad day mood. I mean...You...Sitting there with that ugly scowl on your already ugly face might scare the children so I thought I'd make the world a more beautiful place today by making you smile." He smirked, a teasing glint in his eyes.

AJ couldn't help but smile again as she sniffed the rose gingerly, shutting her eyes for a moment and taking in its sweet, innocent scent. She never noticed the glazed-over, lustful look Draco had flashed her as her eyes had shut.

“Well it was very thoughtful of you Draco...Thanks...And I by the way, I think you’re bloody ugly too.” She teased softly, brushing away the same lock of silver-blond hair falling into his eyes before.

She felt her breathing stop momentarily as she stared at his sparkling silver eyes, both gazing at her with something she couldn’t describe. Feeling a funny feeling at the pit of her stomach, she gulped and looked away hastily.

Draco looked at her curiously, fusing his eyebrows together in bewilderment. Harry saw this and cleared his throat abruptly, causing both AJ and Draco to jump and look at him.

“Anyway, we’d all better get going. We have Potions next and we don’t want to keep Prof. Snape waiting now do we?” He said, getting up. AJ, still flushed and embarrassed, nodded and jumped up from her seat immediately, nervously tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

She put the rose carefully and delicately in her bag and followed after her brother. She didn’t really know why she was blushing but she had a feeling it was something she couldn’t handle right now.

*Maybe I should concentrate on my studies more... I definitely am uncertain about so many things right now...* She thought, shaking her head as she trailed after Harry.

*I can't take this anymore...* Draco thought as he and Harry eyed the pot of what was supposed to be *Bubotubers*—their main project for that day in Herbology. AJ, who was Blaise's partner and was right behind Harry and Draco, wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"I *cannot* believe I am squeezing out pus...I *cannot* believe I am squeezing out pus...I absolutely can *not* believe that I am squeezing out *pus...*" She chanted repeatedly to Blaise, her eyes wide and horribly disgusted. Blaise snorted in agreement, his nose wrinkled in disgust. "Tell me about it..." He muttered under his breath, a grimace on his face.

A Ravenclaw girl, who was sitting right across from Harry, leaned over to him. "Actually, Bubotuber pus is an excellent way to prevent acne and pimples." She told him as a matter-of-factly, obviously trying to impress the dark-haired Slytherin.

Harry merely raised an eyebrow, looking bored, uninterested and extremely disturbed by the disgusting subject. "*Interesting.*" He replied sarcastically, rolling his eyes and turning back to work.

Draco laughed to himself and stole a glance over at AJ again who was now finishing up with her work and removing the gloves from her hands. AJ looked up and met his gaze, raising a single eyebrow in question at him, giving him a small smile.

Draco just gave her a raspberry to annoy her, causing the girl to glare angrily at him and gladly return the favor, her face scrunching into an adorable scowl of irritation at him.

*I just love annoying her...She just looks so delicious—I mean... Amusing...That way...* He thought, hiding a round of laughter behind his hand. He didn't bother saying anything for the rest of the day as the Slytherins began heading down to Hagrid's hut to Care of Magical Creatures.

Draco never really understood why Harry still talked decently to that stupid oaf, Hagrid but seeing as Harry was his best friend, he couldn't do anything about it. He had never really forgotten that incident in third year when a Hippogriff had attacked him on the arm and had nearly caused his father to have the teacher responsible out of his job.

Perhaps though, it was partly his fault too. After all, it was *him* who had rushed to his father to complain about Hagrid's method of teaching. He just didn't like the oaf. It was as simple as that. It had caused a fight between him and Harry since Harry was apparently on Hagrid's side about the whole thing being an accident.

Draco knew that it had something to do with Hagrid being the one who had first gotten Harry and AJ away from the Dursleys so Harry, despite being the bastard he was, tried to attempt to be nice and respectful to Hagrid anyway he can.

AJ hadn't taken sides herself so she helped them both out with the whole ordeal. She was even the one who had helped them forgive each other and become best friends again.

*Stupid oaf has Harry fooled more than I thought...* Draco thought, scowling as Hagrid began to introduce a new kind of creature to them.

“Blast-ended Skrewts!” Hagrid said, pointing to a crate in front of them.

“Blast-ended *what?*” Ron asked, sauntering towards them with the rest of the Gryffindors behind him.

“Eurgh!!” Lavender Brown exclaimed in disgust, jumping away when she caught sight of the crate.

AJ, who had come close herself, had reacted the very same way and had ended up bumping into who Draco who shot out two strong hands and placed them on her shoulders to steady her.

The minute his hand had touched her, he felt a warm tingling on his palm, causing him to yank his hand away in surprise. AJ looked at him for a moment, an unreadable expression on her face before she muttered a *thank you*, turning back to face Hagrid.

Harry, who had barely reacted at all, was wrinkling his nose in disgust. “They look like... Shell-less Lobsters...And what the hell are those things at the back?” He asked.

Hagrid beamed proudly, giving Harry an eager grin. “Yes, they’re beautiful aren’t they Harry? Those are stingers, to answer yer question, though. Yeh’ll all just be feedin em’ today.” He answered.

Both Slytherin and Gryffindor girls, even Hermione, didn’t look too excited about this.

“And why would we *want* to feed them? Hell, why would we even want to raise something as *hideous* as that?” Draco asked in a snobbish tone of voice, narrowing his eyes in loathing.

Crabbe and Goyle, who were right behind them, sniggered stupidly. Pansy and Lila both giggled while even Harry and AJ couldn't help hide a smile. Hermione shot Draco a nasty glare, causing him to snigger as he obliged with his own nasty smirk, sniggering to himself.

“I mean, do they even *do* anything? What is the point of them?” Draco asked again, raising an eyebrow. Hagrid looked as though he was thinking of a good answer to this question until he shrugged and glared at Draco with a determined face.

“It's the next lesson, Malfoy. Deal with it.” He said before proceeding to discuss what they were supposed to do.

Ten minutes later, the Gryffindors were all apprehensively trying to feed their own Blast-ended Skrewt while the Slytherins, except for Harry and AJ, were just looking down at their crate, refusing to touch them.

“Ouch! Damn!” AJ hissed as the Blast-ended Skrewt bit her delicate finger.

Harry cursed out when his skrewt's end exploded, giving him a burn on his finger. “Fuck! What the hell was that?!” He demanded.



Hagrid looked over at him.

“Ah yeah, their ends tend to explode when they blast off. And watch out for their stingers, I think they’re the males. The females have a sucking thing on their bellies which I reckon they use to suck blood.”

Draco looked at him as if he was crazy, his eyes wide and incredulous.

“Wow... Gee... I can see why we want to raise them now. Who wouldn’t want pets who can bite, sting and burn all at once?” he asked sarcastically.

Hermione cast a look at him again, getting annoyed by his haughty, insensitive remarks.

“Just because they’re not pretty doesn’t mean they’re not useful. Like dragon blood, it’s very magical but you wouldn’t want a dragon for a pet, would you?” She snapped.

Ron and Seamus both grinned at Hagrid while Harry, AJ and Draco looked stunned by Hermione’s out burst. Draco, for once, was speechless as he grumbled to himself and set down to inspect his skrewt in disgust.

He was glad when he and AJ both began walking down to their Arithmancy class, Harry and most of the others walking to Divinations.

“So... You gonna tell me the reason why you have that ugly, wrinkled and scowling look on your face again? You look just like a big prune, you know... What’s up? What have you and Harry been up to?” AJ asked in a teasing voice, trying to strike up a conversation to ease the tense atmosphere.

Draco scowled even more at her comment and shrugged, not really interested in the topic she had suddenly initiated. “Nothing much, really. I’ve got other things on my mind. And you’re definitely one to talk, Potter... Having a bad hair day?” He snapped back, looking pissed off.

AJ’s eyes instantly flashed as she stopped and stood there, glaring up at him with her eyes narrowed in challenge. “You don’t have to be such a jerk about it, Malfoy. Honestly, you are *such* an idiot. I was only asking what was on your mind, is it even remotely possible for you *not* to pick a fight with me for at least *one* day?” She retorted harshly at him.

He didn’t answer, both of them falling into a heated, annoyed silence as they willed themselves to continue walking with their eyes focused intently on the hems of their robes.

Draco frowned in frustration and shame as the two Slytherins finally entered the Arithmancy classroom where most of the other students had seated themselves already. Sighing, he turned and gave her a solemn stare, a light blush creeping up into his pale cheeks.

“Okay then, Ms. Perfect I-know-everything Potter...Do you really want to know what’s on my mind? Do you really want to know what I’m

thinking about?" He asked her, his silver eyes burning deeply into hers.

"Of course, I do you incompetent brat! Would I have asked you if I didn't?!" She pointed out irritably, rolling her eyes at him in annoyance.

Draco bit his lip and took a deep breath for a second, willing himself for the worst. "Well... The thing is...AJ, ever since our first year I—"

"Class, take your seats. We shall be starting our first lesson." Professor Vector announced, walking into the room.

Draco let out his breath in relief and shot AJ a smug, self-satisfied sneer. "Never mind. Maybe next time, we're about to start the lesson." He said with a grateful tone of voice, incredibly relieved at the thought of not having to tell her...yet.

AJ looked at him in confusion as he began taking out his parchment and quill, ready to take notes for class.

*Maybe I'll tell her sometime during the end of the year...She might not be ready to change our friendship yet...* Draco thought to himself, beginning to write down what Prof. Vector was writing on the board.

When they had finished Arithmancy, they headed down the corridor to lunch, waiting for the other Slytherins to join them.

"I swear, those Arithmancy calculations are so bloody complicated! I feel like my head is spinning!" AJ complained, scowling as she rifled through her heavy bag.

Draco laughed and offered a hand to her, more than willing to remind her of exactly how *much* of a gentleman he could be. "That's only because you don't have the natural talent for it like I do. Here, I'll carry your bag for you." He said, taking it from her, not bothering to wait for an answer.

"Draco, I am *not* some helpless female ok? I can carry the bag for myself, for your information—" AJ stopped and sighed as Draco snatched the bag from her hands, proving her protests useless in the process.

"You are so annoying Drac... Hey, there's Harry and Blaise!" She said, pointing to them, both walking towards them from another corridor, pissed off looks on their faces.

"Fuck that old bat, Trelawney. Gave me another damn death prediction..." Harry grumbled as they fell in step with them. Draco couldn't help smirking at him as the four Slytherins made their way to the Great Hall for lunch.

"You shouldn't have taken that stupid class to begin with, Potter." He said, shaking his head. "Well how the *fuck* was I supposed to know that Trelawney would turn out to be such an annoying bitch?" Harry retorted, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, shut up for a minute you two and read this. We stole it from a Ravenclaw’s bag this morning. You might find it amusing...” Blaise interrupted, handing Draco a copy of the Daily Prophet.

The four students stopped in the middle of the corridor as Draco and AJ both huddled over the newspaper, reading the article Blaise had pointed at. Blaise and Harry shot each other a sneer, laughing.

Draco’s lips began quirking into a smirk as he read and around the end of the article, he was laughing out loud. AJ was forcing out a laugh but she didn’t think anything was funny about the article at all.

It was an article apparently written by **Rita Skeeter** about the way Ron’s father had let himself be caught in “*undignified*” and “*embarrassing*” scene by helping out **Mad-Eye Moody** a couple of nights ago.

The article was explained in full detail and Rita Skeeter had directed a lot of embarrassment on **Mr. Weasley’s** behalf, making it seem as though what he had done was a disgrace.

“Hey, Weasley!” Draco suddenly yelled as Ron, Hermione and Seamus passed them, he, Harry and Blaise still sniggering. “Draco, please don’t—” AJ began but Draco ignored her, shoving her hand away to walk over to the redhead.

Ron looked at him hatefully, only acknowledging the Slytherins with a glare. “You’re dad’s in the paper, Weasley!” Harry taunted, hurling the

newspaper at Ron. Ron snatched it from the air and read it quickly, Hermione and Seamus reading over his shoulder.

Ron's ears began to turn bright red as he looked up and shot daggers at both Harry and Draco. "Leave it alone, Ron. Don't let them get to you." Hermione said, trying to pull him away.

Harry and AJ both began to scowl as Hermione linked her arms through Ron's trying to pull him from them. Harry walked towards them, a sneer on his face as he narrowed his eyes dangerously at the Gryffindor trio.

"Hey, there's a picture of your mom too. And your house...If you could call that a *house*, that is." Harry mocked again, causing both Seamus and Hermione this time to keep Ron back from lunging at Harry.

Draco burst out laughing, visibly shaking with mirth. "Yeah, and your mom's a bit porky, isn't she?" He agreed, he and Harry bursting out into sniggers again.

Blaise and AJ watched them, Blaise smirking while AJ shook her head in disbelief. "Let's go, Blaise." She said abruptly, pulling onto his arm but he refused.

"But this is very amusing!" He protested, whining out loudly with a disappointed scowl on his face.

“You know *your* mother, Malfoy? Does she always look like she has dung under her nose or was it just because *you* were with her?” Seamus called out in Ron’s defense, trying to hold Ron back.

Draco’s cheeks tinged with pink from embarrassment, looking outraged at the insult. “Don’t you dare insult my mother, Finnegan.”

“Keep your big, dirty mouth shut then.” Seamus retorted coldly, all three Gryffindors turning away. Draco narrowed his eyes and pulled out his wand to threaten them when—

***BANG!***

*“OH NO YOU DON’T LADDIE!”*

Harry jumped in shock and whirled around to see Prof. Moody stalking towards them, his wand outstretched.

Harry looked down to see where his best friend had been but instead of Draco, he saw a pure, white ferret bouncing on the spot, squeaking painfully with each bounce.

“Draco?” He asked in disbelief, his voice cracking.

Eyes wide, AJ walked over to it in concern and scooped the bouncing ferret in her arms, her eyes glazed over as she stroked the wincing ferret gently.

*Figures... AJ always did have a soft spot for animals... Even if the animal is Draco...* Harry thought, trying hard not to break out into a small smile. Everyone in the corridor was stunned in silence while Moody walked over to the three Gryffindors.

“Did he get any of you?” He asked them, both his eyes inspecting them all curiously. Ron, Seamus and Hermione all shook their heads, the two boys both shaking with suppressed laughter.

“He... missed, Prof.” Seamus gasped out, still shaking.

“*LEAVE IT!*” Prof. Moody suddenly yelled, making them all jump in surprise and fear.

“Leave what?” Ron asked, looking around stupidly.

“Not you, *her*.” He said, turning around to face AJ, who was still holding the ferret, giving Moody a hateful, indignant glare. Moody stomped over to her, causing her to gulp visibly and walk back a few steps.

“I don’t like people who attack when their opponent’s back is turned.” He threatened. The ferret gave a terrified squeak and tried to run away but AJ clutched it tighter, stroking it to calm it down.

“Prof. Moody, I know Draco. He wasn’t planning on attacking with his opponent’s back turned anyway.” Harry spoke for his best friend



coldly, glaring at Moody. Moody ignored him, keeping his eyes trained on AJ warily.

“Put that creature down, girl.” Moody ordered, his wand over the ferret who was now squeaking hysterically and was burying itself in AJ’s arms to avoid being hit with Moody’s spell.

AJ glared at their Professor, her emerald eyes blazing dangerously. “No. I happen to know that using transfiguration as a punishment is not permitted in Hogwarts so—”

*“PROF. MOODY! IS THAT A STUDENT?”* McGonagall shrieked as she stormed into the hall, her wand in her hand.

“Yup.” Moody answered easily, a smirk on his face. “No!” She screeched, flicking her wand over the ferret in AJ’s arms.

AJ gasped in shock as Draco reappeared with a loud snapping noise, still in her arms but unfortunately, the real Draco was much heavier than a ferret so she stumbled backwards, Draco falling on top of her.

They both were wincing in pain as AJ looked up and caught eyes with Draco, who was blushing furiously from both embarrassment and from falling on top of her, his sleek blond hair now disheveled.

AJ locked eyes with him for a long moment, both teens blushing darker before she finally blinked and forced a nervous laugh, finally getting herself to struggle beneath his form. “Get the hell of me,

Malfoy! You're not exactly light as a feather!" She pointed out sarcastically, trying to ignore the nervous beating inside her chest.

"Uhm...Yeah... Sorry..." Draco mumbled, getting up to his feet and holding a hand to help her. AJ took it and got to her feet, wincing and dusting her robes. Draco glared instantly at Moody, his pale face flushed with utter humiliation and embarrassment.

"When my father hears about this, I'll make sure he—"

"Oh yeah boy? Well I happen to know ol' Lucius so you tell him Moody going to be watching his son. Now, your head of house is Snape, isn't it?" He asked sharply.

"Yes." Draco said resentfully, glaring right back.

"Another old friend." He growled, grasping Draco's arm and dragging him towards the dungeons. Harry cast an intense look at Hermione, who glared at him with her usual resentment. Harry just shook his head at her and gave her a displeased look before he smirked and stormed off after Draco to help his best friend out.

Ron and Seamus, who were now laughing loudly as Malfoy being a ferret, walked off towards the Great Hall as the people in the corridor began to resume its usual atmosphere.

"Don't any of you bother me!" Ron suddenly snapped, a big, wide grin on his face as he did.

“Why not?” Seamus asked, fusing his eyebrows together at his best friend in question.

“Because I want to fix that in my memory forever! *Draco Malfoy*, the amazing, bouncing ferret!” Ron exclaimed, causing him and Seamus to burst out into hysterical, jolly laughter.

Hermione rolled her eyes but allowed a laugh, amused at her best friends’ childish antics. Then, sighing, she shook her head and was about to walk off after them when she heard a cold, familiar female voice call out to her.

“Hey Granger!”

**A/N:** Hope you guys like the changes I am putting into Draco and AJ’s early interactions. Just thought I’d make it more believable that way... Oh! And Hope you guys liked the edited parts if you noticed any...Hehe...Anyway, **PLEASE REVIEW OKAY? REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW REVIEW!!** (I think you get the picture...wink-wink)

## Chapter 9- His Wicked Ways

“Hey Granger!”

*God...What did I do to deserve all this?* Hermione thought as she cursed under her breath, freezing on the spot. Slowly, she turned around and soon found herself face to face with the ice princess herself, AJ Potter.

AJ glared right back at her, her lips formed into a half sneer as she had her hands on her hips in a haughty position, eyebrows raised slightly in disdain. *Aw...Well isn't that a pretty little picture...* Hermione thought scornfully as she raised an eyebrow at the girl, frowning.

“What do you want, Potter? I don't have time to talk to Slytherin scum like you...” Hermione said coldly, crossing her arms over her chest.

AJ smirked at the line and walked toward her until they were face to face, an intense, challenging glint in the other girl's eyes. “I want to talk to you. *Alone.*” She said sharply, jerking her head towards a dark, deserted corridor.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her suspiciously. She knew perfectly well what Slytherins were capable of doing when they were alone so she didn't want to be in that certain situation once again... She already knew what it felt like thanks to the *other* Potter twin...

The raven-haired Slytherin just looked back calmly at her with an innocent smile on her face. “*Please...*” AJ mocked begged, her voice

dripping with sarcasm as she rolled her eyes upward in an irritated manner.

“Mione! Come *on*! Aren’t you going?!” Ron yelled out to her, he and Seamus stopping and glancing at them from the other end of the corridor. Hermione looked back at him for a minute, pondering whether or not she should trust her Slytherin rival or go with Ron and Seamus.

*Just go with Ron... AJ is just going to be trouble, just ignore her—*

“You guys go on ahead! I’ll join you guys a little later!” She found herself yelling back in reply, turning back to face the smirking girl in front of her. AJ gave her a grin, highly amused at the suspicious look on the Gryffindor’s face.

“I take it that’s a yes, Granger.” She said, haughtily flipping her lustrous hair over her shoulder. Hermione shifted her suspicious gaze to the person who had just come up behind her, another Slytherin she knew better than to trust—*Blaise Zabini*.

“Fine... But I thought you wanted to talk alone. What is *he* doing here?” Hermione pointed out.

AJ laughed softly, turning to look at her best friend. “I’ll catch up with you later, Blaise. Meet you in the Great Hall.” AJ told him, nodding at him briefly. Blaise raised an eyebrow at her, obviously not pleased with missing out on the action about to take place.

“Are you sure?” He asked, throwing a resentful glance at Hermione, eyes narrowed in loathing and suspicion. AJ rolled her eyes but nodded to reassure him, giving him a smirk.

“I’m *sure*. I’ll be fine, go on then...” She replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes and waving him off. Blaise cast one more suspicious glance at Hermione before he returned AJ with a nod and walked off towards the Great Hall, his robes swishing behind him.

*What is it with Slytherins and robe swishing?! Is that some sort of Slytherin trademark or something?* Hermione thought in annoyance as she followed the raven-haired girl into the corridor.

“Why does it seem like you always have bodyguards with you wherever you go? Are you *that* helpless, *princess*?” Hermione asked her wryly, sarcasm clearly dripping from her voice. She stopped abruptly as AJ whipped around and glared at her, gleaming wand in her hand as she pointed it directly at Hermione.

Hermione froze, her eyes widening in shock and alarm at the malice glinting in the other girl’s eyes. “I’m *not* helpless. I’m just extremely delicate.” AJ simply said, letting her lips move into a slow side grin that would have made the boys swoon.

“Potter, what the hell do you think you are doing? I thought—”

“Relax Granger. I was just going to turn on a light.” AJ interrupted her sarcastically, sniggering at the frightened look on Hermione’s face.

“What?” Hermione asked, confused.

AJ muttered something under her breath, pointing her wand behind Hermione. Immediately, all the wall lamps of the corridor lit up in a faint glow of light, allowing Hermione to see the other girl’s face. AJ gave her one of her fake, friendly sweet smiles.

“You like the wand? It’s pretty rare actually, has a strand of veela hair and—”

“Potter, I can’t tell you how much I enjoy these little talks of ours but to make things easier, why don’t you just tell me what you want.” Hermione interrupted sharply.

“Touchy, Granger. I was only trying to strike up a friendly conversation between us...” AJ said dryly, pretending to sniff in indignation.

“Could’ve fooled me...” Hermione muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes.

AJ smirked and tucked her wand back in her robes as she leaned on the wall and faced Hermione with a hateful snarl on her features. “I’ll make this quick, Granger. I have other important business to attend to. I just want to warn you about something.” She said darkly, narrowing her emerald-green eyes at Hermione.

Hermione kept silent but nodded briefly, her eyebrow slightly raised in anticipation and curiosity.

“I’d keep an eye on both your little guard dogs if I were you. Keep them on their own turf. I’ve noticed them messing with us Slytherins a lot lately. You don’t want to anger any one of us Granger. Keep Weasley and Finnegan in line if you really are their so-called *best friend*.” AJ threatened, spitting out the word ‘best friend’ as if it was a curse word.

Hermione’s jaw dropped open in shock and indignation, growling at the Slytherin girl in anger. “Are you telling *me* that I should control my friends?!” She challenged, her eyes blazing.

AJ looked at her calmly, barely reacting to the other girl’s anger. “No. I’m only giving you some advice as a fellow female who spends most of her time around the average hyper male hormones. I’m not stupid. I know the tension Weasley feels every time Harry is nearby. You might want to tame him down.” She jeered.

“What do *you* care anyway? And since when did *you* give any attention at all to us Gryffindors? You’ve never paid any attention to us before.” Hermione countered angrily.

AJ’s eyes flashed slightly, her calm face twisting into a hideous, ferocious growl. “Hey, what the *bloody hell* is your problem, Granger? I’m trying to help you morons out for once this time and this is how you react?!” She snapped.



“Well stop trying to pretend that you know how we are! Ron is *my* best friend and *I’m* the one who should know what he’s feeling right now. Who the hell are *you* to tell me how my best friend is and how I should control *him*?! Just butt out!” Hermione snapped.

AJ looked angry now as she stepped forward, her eyes blazing with anger. “I *know* Weasley is your goddamn best friend, Granger which is exactly why I chose to tell you but if you’re going to be such a bitch about it, then *fine*! I couldn’t care less about Weasley or you for that matter. You’re right, I *don’t* know him and I don’t *intend* to but I was just thinking that for once, I’d take the your side of things. I guess I was wrong on that one!” AJ retorted, clenching her hands into fists, her face turning red with both anger, hurt and suppressed jealousy.

Hermione couldn’t think of anything to say at the moment as the girl in front of her seemed to tense up after ever minute, muttering to herself and facing the floor in anger. “Wow, that’s a switch... A Slytherin taking a Gryffindor’s side? Now what do you really want AJ? I know there’s something you’re up to.”

Hermione couldn’t help but smirk until AJ’s head suddenly snapped back up, her hateful face back as it curled into a hideous scowl. “I bet you and your friends enjoyed the show earlier, didn’t you, Granger?!” AJ taunted, her voice suddenly back to the normal Slytherin taunting Gryffindor tone.

“What the hell are you talking about now, Potter?” Hermione snapped but AJ’s eyes were now glinting maliciously, her eyes frighteningly evil and bitter.

“The show, Granger! Admit it, you and your fucking friends enjoy seeing us Slytherins in a humiliating situation. You like it when we screw up. You thought Draco getting turned into a bloody ferret was bloody *funny* didn’t you?!” AJ continued, her eyes still sparkling with a wild look.

Hermione backed away slightly as the girl stepped forward, her whole body tense and rigid with anger.

“I don’t—”

“I’ll bet you did... You all just *love* it when we make mistakes, don’t you? Oh yeah, you probably weren’t paying much attention to what happened anyway, huh Granger? You were too busy drooling over my twin brother to notice much.” AJ accused, her eyes narrowing.

Hermione flushed an angry red.

“No I was *not*! I—”

“You have a thing for my brother, don’t you? It’s pretty obvious, Granger. Do you honestly think I’m that damn stupid?! I see the lustful, dreamy looks you throw at him ever chance you get. It’s disgustingly delusional!” AJ interrupted again, laughing mockingly.

Hermione sputtered with rage, utterly speechless.

“Who would have thought that goody-two-shoes Hermione Granger would have a thing for nasty, bad-boy Harry Potter? Did you honestly think you would have a chance with him, Granger? In spite of what other people say, opposites *don’t* attract.” AJ mocked spitefully.

Hermione returned her look of disdain, turning green in disgust.

“I happen to have absolutely no interest in your *disgusting* brother, Potter. However, why don’t you ask *him* that?” She returned, raising an eyebrow.

“What the *fuck* is *that* supposed to mean?” AJ demanded, shoving her roughly.

Hermione stumbled slightly but caught herself and stood up stiffly, not wanting to fight back. “He’s *your* brother. You figure it out, *Potter twin*.” Hermione said slowly and steadily in a low voice before she slowly turned around and started to walk away when AJ stepped in front of her, cutting her off.

“I *hate* that name... And what the hell does *that* mean, Granger? Are you actually implying that he *likes* you?! And who the *fuck* gave you that idea?” AJ challenged, moving forward and shoving Hermione roughly again.

“Like I said, figure it out yourself, AJ. If you’re as smart as they say you are.” Hermione retorted, regaining her balance and trying to walk away but AJ was unrelenting.

"You don't stand a chance! Gryffindors and Slytherins don't match at all! You should know that by now so you can just stop your lustful dreams over my brother because, you and him, *never happening*." AJ told her with a hint of jealousy in her eyes.

"Don't worry, AJ. I don't intend to get together with that insensitive jerk you call a *brother* at all. And besides, I have a feeling I should be telling *you* about Gryffindor-Slytherin pairings that won't match." Hermione returned, a dubious look in her eye.

That did it. AJ backed away suddenly, a brief flash of panic in her eyes before she replaced it with shock. "I don't know what you're talking about, Granger." She said flatly, crossing her arms stubbornly over her chest.

"Oh really? You want to play a game then, AJ?" Hermione said sarcastically, walking towards the other girl confidently with a smug smile on her face. AJ backed away further into the corridor, her eyes slightly hesitant and nervous as the Gryffindor looked at her with a knowing smirk.

"Why would the great AJ Potter be constantly staring at Gryffindor Ronald Weasley?" Hermione asked her sardonically, looking pleased with herself as she continued to walk towards AJ causing her to walk backwards to get away.

AJ's eyes darted around nervously but she scowled at Hermione, trying to find a way out. "I honestly do not know what the *fuck* you are

talking about. Drop it.” She said coldly, whirling around and walking away down further into the corridor.

“Aw, come on Potter! This is a fun game! Give me *three* guesses why.” Hermione taunted as she followed AJ’s back, twirling her wand around in her hand. AJ didn’t reply but Hermione saw her shoulders tense up in anger.

“You...Have an evil plan for him! No, wait, that’s not it... Hmm... You...hate his stinking guts! Nah... Not it either... Come on Potter, am I getting warm?” Hermione yelled out at the other girl’s back.

AJ didn’t reply as she continued to walk further away, her hands clenched into tight fists.

“No, wait, I got it! You fancy him! Don’t you Potter? You fancy Ron! That’s why you’ve taken so much of your time to spite him and to direct your insecure jealousy at *me*!” Hermione accused, putting her hands on her hips.

AJ stopped walking abruptly, her hands clenched dangerously as she muttered something dark and indistinguishable under her breath. “I take it that’s a yes?” Hermione asked knowingly, giving the other girl a smug smile.

AJ cursed under her breath again before she finally let out a vicious snarl and whipped around, lunging at the other girl. Hermione let out a scream as the Slytherin tackled her to the ground and began yanking violently on her hair, slapping her repeatedly across the face.

“You stupid, nosy bitch!” AJ yelled, slapping her again, a new, interesting curse word shouted off every time her pale, cold hand connected with Hermione’s soft cheek.

Hermione began fighting back at her, yanking the girl’s hair and slapping her hands away. “Get away from me! Get off!” Hermione protested loudly as AJ slapped her again, her cheek stinging with pain.

“I *hate* you!! You think you know everything! You think so you’re so damn bloody smarter than I am!! You think you’re so damn *perfect*, don’t you?! Who the *fuck* do you think you are?!” AJ screamed as she violently banged the Gryffindor’s head against the floor, causing Hermione to wince in pain and cry out for help.

“AJ! What the fuck are you doing?! Stop that!” A familiar, male voice called down the corridor. AJ didn’t look up from her violent assault on Hermione but Hermione felt the running footsteps on the cold floor.

A pair of strong, male hands grabbed AJ by the waist and pulled her off Hermione, restraining the Slytherin as she tried to struggle wildly free with her captor, vaguely reminding Hermione of a feline tiger.

“Let go of me, Harry! Let me go!! Argh, fuck you! Let me go!” AJ screamed as she tried to wrestle herself free from her brother’s grasp but he was just too strong for her and his arms felt like iron around her slim waist.

Harry gave her his cold, menacing glare and almost immediately, his sister calmed down and hung her head in resentment, causing Hermione's eyes to widen at the obvious control Harry had over his twin sister.

"AJ, I want you to get yourself fixed up right now and then I want you to go the Great Hall. What I just saw *never* happened. *Now*." He said coldly and slowly, pronouncing each word in a careful manner to make sure she understood.

"But Harry, you don't understand! She—"

"Don't argue with me, AJ. Do as I say. *NOW*." Harry interrupted her harshly, narrowing his eyes at her. AJ sighed in defeat and gave him a furious glare, running a hand through her now wild hair.

"Fine! Have it your way..." She snapped, whirling around and storming off, robes swishing dramatically as she did. As soon as she was gone, Harry smirked and leaned down to give Hermione, who was still on the floor, a hand.

Hermione scowled at him but took his hand, nevertheless took his hand to help her stand up. "I have absolutely no doubt why you and AJ are twins, Potter." Hermione said spitefully, dusting her robes, her cheeks red with pain and her head aching immensely.

"Thanks Granger. I like to think so. I'm quite proud of my little sister, wouldn't you think?" Harry asked casually, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh not at all...” Hermione said sarcastically, rolling her eyes and trying to walk off when Harry suddenly grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him.

Hermione gasped as her back pressed against his firm chest, Harry’s arms wrapping around her in a seductive manner. “Are you hurt? Want me to kiss it better?” He whispered in her ear, a finger gently stroking her cheek.

Hermione winced as his finger sent shivers down her spine, causing her to shove him away from her. “I’m fine, Potter. I better head down to the Great Hall.” She said bleakly, trying to walk away and avoid another moment alone with Harry but he caught her hand in his, causing her to stop abruptly.

“Are you always this cold and distant around handsome eligible young guys about to ask you out?” Harry asked, his eyes teasing her with amusement.

Hermione yanked her hand away and glared at him, refusing to blush at his flirtatious comment. “Yes, because frankly, *handsome, eligible young* guys don’t ask me out after their little sister had just finished pulling my hair off!” Hermione retorted, narrowing her eyes.

Harry laughed in amusement, shrugging in response. “Hey, I’m sorry about that okay, Granger? How about I make it up to you somehow? Care to go with me sometime this week to a little bit of night swimming?” He asked, his eyebrow raising enticingly.



Hermione's eyes widened as she stared in him incredulously, disbelief obvious in her features. "Has it ever occurred to you that we can not go night swimming in the lake unless we want to freeze to death?" Hermione pointed out.

Harry's self-satisfied smirk widened, a glint of mischief sparkling in his beautiful emerald-green eyes.

"We're not swimming in the *lake* Granger."

Hermione's eyebrow furrowed in confusion.

"But then, *where*—"

"Trust me on this one Granger. You'll need it. It'll help loosen your tension from all the studying you do everyday. I won't take no for an answer." Harry said, pulling her close again.

"Potter, I don't *want*—"

She didn't get to finish what she was going to say since Harry cut her off by placing his lips firmly on hers before pulling away almost abruptly, releasing his hold on her. "Expect a message when to meet me. Until then..." He kissed her briefly again and before Hermione could react, whipped around and sauntering down the corridor away from her.

“Do I even have a choice?” Hermione muttered darkly under her breath, heading down the opposite direction to the Great Hall.

Harry yawned as Prof. Snape continued to scare the hell out of Neville Longbottom about melting his cauldron for the sixth time while Draco, who was his next to him in potions, stirred his cauldron lazily.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Longbottom! You couldn’t make a decent potion to save your life!” Prof. Snape barked at him, shaking his head in disgust as he walked on to the next Potion.

“The potion was to be color green, Weasley. Not *orange*. Five points from Gryffindor.” Snape said, smirking sinisterly as he wrote down Ron’s grade. Seamus, who was next to him, had to elbow Ron to keep him from yelling out something unmistakably rude at the Potions master that would have indeed cost them much more points.

Harry yawned again and watched as Snape passed by Hermione without a word, scribbling something down on his notebook before he moved on to the Slytherins. Harry smirked at Hermione’s annoyed, indignant look, clearly not pleased at all for now having been acknowledged.

Ever since their meeting in the corridor a couple of days before, Harry had been thinking of changing his approach towards the girl. He couldn’t win Hermione over by his usual, aggressive and seductive bad boy approach. That wouldn’t work for her at all. He needed to

tone it down a little and let her be the one who comes to him. He knew she couldn't resist him for long. The girl would cave in eventually.

"Excellent, Ms. Potter. Five points to Slytherin." Snape praised, nodding at AJ with an approving smile. AJ returned it with her own innocent, sweet smile; throwing a sneer at Hermione's direction.

Hermione just glared at her, eyes narrowed in loathing and resentment as she did. Harry snapped out of his trance as Snape stopped by his cauldron, lazily inspecting it.

"Very Good, Mr. Potter. Perfect once again. Another five points to Slytherin." Snape said, nodding. He and Harry exchanged knowing smirks before Snape moved on to Draco's who was yawning and throwing his usual hateful looks at the Gryffindors.

"Another five points to Slytherin....Very good indeed, Mr. Malfoy. You *are* your father's son." Snape said in satisfaction, nodding at a smugly smirking Draco before passing him by.

"You're just saying that because you're being a biased, slimy git!" Ron yelled at him, Seamus holding him back from lunging at their professor. Harry and Draco both broke out into identical sadistic smirks as Prof. Snape rounded on him, his jet-black eyes narrowing in anger.

"You will restrain yourself from speaking to me in that manner, Mr. Weasley if you do not wish to be given a month's worth of detention

and to have more points deducted from your house because I assure you, at this state, you cannot afford to lose any more.” Snape spat at him.

Ron stiffened with anger but sat back down, a scowl on his face as he muttered something incoherent under his breath. Before anyone else could say anything, they heard the bell ring which stole Snape’s attention away from Ron and face the rest of the class.

“Your assignment is to write a six-foot long essay about the positive and negative side-effects of the potion you just accomplished. Due next meeting. *Dismissed.*” He said abruptly, nodding at them.

All the students stood up immediately and gathered their things, heading for the next class. The Gryffindors all headed for Transfiguration while the Slytherins headed for their first ever DADA lesson with Professor Moody. Harry flashed Hermione a wink as he walked off, causing her to sputter with anger and indignation.

“I *cannot* believe we have to recognize that asshole as a *professor*... I’ve never been so humiliated in my life... Turning me into a bloody *animal*...” Draco grumbled to Harry as they followed the Slytherins to Moody’s classroom.

Harry rolled his eyes as he listened to his best friend’s whining and lead Draco to the back of the classroom where the two took a seat in between Crabbe and Goyle. Harry watched as his sister situated herself at the very front of the room right next to Blaise, the two pulling out their copy of ***The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self Protection.***

The Slytherins, surprisingly even Pansy and Lila, kept unusually quiet and waited as they heard Moody's loud clanking footsteps get louder and louder until he briskly entered the classroom, making them all jump in surprise.

"You can put those books away, you won't need them." Moody said, clunking over to his desk and taking out a long parchment, his magical eye whirring around, inspecting the Slytherins.

"Hmm... So... I'm with the popular, notorious Slytherins today, huh?" He asked wryly, scanning over his list of names.

He began calling out all their names to check their attendance, his normal eye on the paper and his magical eye spinning around the room to look at the face of the students he called out.

"Potter, Harry and Amanda?" He asked, both his eyes now turning to look at both Potters who had raised their hands lazily at the mention of their names.

Moody didn't say anything as he called out the last one, Blaise, before he stood up and walked to the front of the class. "Right then, Prof. Lupin sent me a letter about your progress. I heard you all have already taken a number of dark creatures last year, am I right?" Moody asked, his magical eye inspecting each of them.

They all nodded wordlessly.

“But you are all way behind in dealing with curses... Mind you. According to the Ministry of Magic, I’m to teach you all counter curses. Supposedly I ain’t allowed to show you what illegal dark curses look like but Dumbledore reckons you all can handle it. Now, how are you all to defend yourself against something you’ve never seen? A wizard will not openly tell you he’s about to curse you so you need to be prepared, alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Perrine, when I’m talking.” Moody said suddenly, his magical eye resting on Lila.

Lila flushed in embarrassment. She had been showing Pansy her latest pictures of both Harry and Draco under the desk but apparently, Moody’s magical eye could see through wood too. Harry and Draco smirked at each other, shaking their head in both amusement and disgust at the two girls.

“So, do any of you know any curses which are highly illegal?” Moody asked them. Several hands rose high into the air, not surprisingly including AJ’s and Draco’s. Draco was raising his hand lazily, his dark, evil gaze resting hatefully at the Professor.

Nevertheless, Moody pointed at Draco, his normal eye glinting with recognition at Draco while his magical eye was still on Lila. “My Father’s told me about it once. The Imperius curse.” Draco drawled confidently, an eyebrow arched as his face held a gaze of his usual aristocratic distaste.

“Your father *would* know that one. Gave the ministry a lot of trouble before.” Moody said in equal resentment at Draco, narrowing his eyes. He walked over to his desk and opened his desk drawer where he pulled out a jar of large, black, hairy spiders.

Harry saw his sister stiffen in disgust in front of the room as Moody reached into the jaw and pulled out a spider. He held it in the palm of his hand for them all to see it, pointed his wand at it and muttered, "*Imperio!*"

The spider leapt from his hand and began to swing backward and forward from a silk thread as though on a trapeze. It then did a back flip and landed on the desk where it spun into continuous cartwheels.

Moody jerked his wand again, causing the spider to do a tap dance, much to the amusement of the Slytherins. Harry and Draco both raised an eyebrow mild amusement as the other Slytherins began laughing.

"Think it's funny don't you? You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?" Moody growled. The laughter died down instantly.

"Total control... I could make it do anything I wanted it to. Years back, wizards and witches were being controlled by this very curse. Extremely hard job for the ministry back then to determine who was acting out of their freewill and who was being controlled." Moody told them grimly.

"The Imperius can be fought and I'll teach you all how but it takes inner strength. Avoid being hit while you can. *CONSTANT VIGILANCE!*" He barked.

Everyone jumped in surprise again.

“Any other curse?” He asked, looking around at them. Harry tentatively raised a hand, recalling a curse he had seen in a dark arts book last year.

Moody looked over at him with both eyes. “Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“The... *Cruciatus* Curse.” He said in a low tone of voice, letting a sneer spread across his face frighteningly. Moody looked curiously over at Harry in suspicion for a moment before he nodded and took out another spider.

“*Engorgio!*”

The spider swelled until it was larger than a tarantula and at once, Moody pointed his wand at it.

“*Crucio!*” He yelled out.

The spider instantly rolled over to his side and began twitching violently as though it would be screaming in excruciating pain if it had a voice.

Harry’s eyes widened in interest and evil as he imagined himself learning that curse and doing that to Voldemort, watching his wretched form writhing on the floor, screaming in pain. That thought



in mind, his eyes suddenly narrowed and his lips formed itself into a scary, sadistic smile.

Draco's eyes, however, were surprisingly calm and looked as though he was enjoying the show while everyone else was gaping at the spider.

*"Don't kill them, Tom! Please! Haven't you done enough?! Don't you hurt my children!"* A female voice screamed in Harry's head. Both Harry and AJ heard the voice as they watched the spider writhe some more, AJ paling with fear and fright.

Harry easily ignored the voice, his eyes intensifying in evil hatred as he imagined Voldemort dying like that spider but AJ had had enough. "Stop it!!" She screamed, looking extremely terrified.

Moody stopped immediately and looked over at her. She was pale with fear and shock, visibly trembling in terror of what happened.

*"Pain... Crucio is all about inflicting excruciating pain on a person. That one was popular too."* Moody told them all in a dark voice.

Draco glanced at Harry, who had calmed down and relaxed slightly but his eyes were still glittering evilly, as though he had just planned to do something secretly. "You're planning something, I know it Harry. I can see it in your eyes." Draco whispered knowingly.

Harry turned to sneer at him, nodding slightly in affirmation to what he had just said. "I'll tell you later, Draco..." He muttered.

“So, who knows the last one?” Moody asked.

Nobody else dared to raise a hand for a minute before AJ shakily raised a hand for the third time. Moody called on her, looking at her intently.

“*Avada Kedavra*” She whispered, looking deathly pale. Everyone around her shifted uneasily.

“Yes... the killing curse...” Moody said, a slight, frightening smile on his face.

He took the last spider out of the jar and pointed his wand at it just as everyone froze, waiting to see what would happen.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound as though something was rushing through the air. The spider then died instantly, causing the other Slytherins to gasp out loud.

Even Draco looked pale now while AJ’s eyes were wide with fear and shock. Harry was the only one who had let himself smile evilly as he watched the spider die in a cold, morbid silence.

*Fine...If that was how that bastard Voldemort killed my parents, I'll kill him in the exact same way...*He thought darkly, his eyes narrowed.

“Not nice. Not pleasant. No counter curse at all. Only one person had survived it and he’s sitting right in front of me.” Moody said, looking right at Harry. Everyone turned to look at him. Harry just looked back calmly at all of them with a cold, blank stare until they all looked away uneasily.

Harry tuned out as Moody talked some more about the curses. He knew what he had to do. He wanted not only to learn how to do the counter curses of those curses but he also wanted to learn those three curses himself.

He didn’t care if it would get him in trouble at all... He wanted to learn them. To use them on Voldemort to show him all the hatred and anger he had been hiding for him these 14 years.

Harry would go all out this time. He knew that he had already self-learned how to do a couple of dark magic during their third year, which only Draco had known about.

He didn’t dare tell his sister about it. He knew she would never want him to learn the Dark Arts but Harry had found himself drawn to it, somehow. Like he had to learn it for it was a part of himself... he couldn’t explain how... He just had an intense *hunger... a thirst* for learning the dark arts.

He wasn't purely evil though. He knew that he could control himself when using the dark arts. He knew he wouldn't use it for the wrong purposes. He knew how to control his dark powers...

Harry smirked as he thought of what he would be doing. When he had the times, he would go down to the restricted section of the library and read those dark arts book he always found and he would train himself to be much more advanced in magic.

He would train himself into being a much more powerful wizard, and nobody else would know except for Draco. Harry knew that Draco himself knew a great deal about dark magic. His father had a lot of books back at their home and Draco would spend his free time reading it in the summer. He wouldn't hinder Harry from his wants.

"Harry! Come on! Hurry up!" Draco snapped at him, yanking him out of class as they were dismissed. "What is it now, Draco?" Harry asked, irritated at having his thoughts interrupted.

"AJ." He whispered, pointing to the girl.

She was leaning against the wall outside of the classroom, still extremely pale in fear as Blaise kept talking to her, trying to calm her down.

Her eyes were unfocused as it seemed as though she couldn't hear a thing Blaise was saying. "AJ, come on, snap out of it! Please?" Blaise pleaded in concern, gently tapping her cheek to get her attention.

Harry's eyes widened as he pushed past Draco and walked over to his twin. "What the fuck happened?" He demanded, his eyes flashing at Blaise.

"She's been like that after Moody did the killing curse." Blaise answered, waving his hand in front of her face.

Harry cursed under his breath and gently reached out a hand and turned his sister's face toward him. "AJ? Come on, snap out of it, I'm here... Look at me, AJ! Come on!" Harry said gently, cupping her face with his hands to keep her facing him.

Draco and Blaise both watched as AJ's eyes seemed to move slowly and rest themselves on Harry's worried features. "You see me AJ? It's me... Come on AJ..." He pleaded, kissing her forehead and burying his head on her shoulder

AJ's lips allowed a soft whisper. "Harry..." Harry looked carefully at the expression in her eyes. "I heard mom...." She whispered shakily before her face crumpled instantly and she tears began falling down from her cheeks.

Harry felt his own eyes fill with tears but he held them back and enveloped his sister in a tight embrace, letting her cry out loud against his chest. "Shhh.... It's okay sis... So did I..." Harry whispered in her ear, rocking her back and forth to calm her down as she cried on him, her soft, anguished sobs and whimpers echoing through the dark corridor.

Draco and Blaise both exchanged looks of sadness as they looked at them. Harry shut his eyes in pain as he felt his sister tremble against him. Voldemort will die for what he did to us...

*I know he's coming back for me... But... I will kill him... I promise you AJ...* He thought before he gently pried himself away from his sister. "Are you going to be okay? I'm sorry but I have to do something important... You understand don't you?" He asked her, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

She nodded, sniffing and wiping her eyes as she forced out a weak, shaky, teary smile. Harry nodded at her and gave her a tender smile, planting a soft kiss on her forehead again before he called Draco over.

"Say Draco, can you and Blaise take my sister back to the Slytherin dorms? I just have to write a letter to someone in the Owlery." Harry said, gently pushing his sister towards Draco.

Still in need of comfort, AJ almost immediately buried her face in Draco's chest, still crying softly against him. Draco's eyes widened in surprise as he uneasily wrapped both his arms around her and stroked her hair gently.

"No problem, Harry. Will you be alright?" He asked as he and Blaise began to lead AJ in the direction of the Slytherin dungeons. Harry nodded grimly, watching them go for a minute before he headed off towards the Owlery.

He looked around for Hedwig and found her sitting next to Ferio, AJ's eagle owl. He whistled at her, causing her to fly over to him and land on his shoulder, nipping his ear affectionately.

"I need you to send me a letter for Sirius okay? It's crucial he receives it." Harry asked her, stroking her gently. Hedwig hooted in agreement, and waited patiently as Harry scribbled hastily on a piece of parchment. When he had finished, Hedwig stuck out her leg for him to fasten the letter on her before she nipped his finger gently and took off into the night.

Harry watched her briefly disappear through the sky before he sighed and headed down to the Slytherin Common Room where he found Draco sitting in one of the high armchairs facing the fire intently.

"Aren't asleep yet, are you? Where's my twin sister? Is she okay?" Harry asked him, settling down on the seat across from him. Draco half-smirked and turned to face him, the fire casting a slight glow on his features.

"Way too early Potter. Your sister is fine, she's resting up in her dorms... Besides, you know how I am, I can't sleep yet... Anyway, what did you have to tell me?" Draco asked, facing him with a serious look.

Harry raised both eyebrows in mock innocence, earning him a smirk from Draco in response. "Oh? Did I say anything about telling you something? I don't recall..." He asked incredulously.

Draco scowled and made to punch him but Harry easily countered, catching his fist in mid air and laughing in amusement. "Nice try Malfoy." He said as he released Draco's fist, still laughing.

Draco narrowed his eyes angrily at him for a minute before he gave in to Harry's laughter and joined in, shaking his head. "Whatever Potter. Now tell me, what the fuck were you planning earlier? I know that evil glint in your eye." He said, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

Harry grinned slyly, leaning back on the armchair and resting the back of his head on his hands. "Say, Draco... Your dad gives you those copies of those dark arts books right?" He asked.

Draco still looked suspicious, raising an eyebrow in response.

"Yeah... So?"

Harry grinned evilly at him, his eyes glinting maliciously once again.

"Did you ever try learning them?" He asked in an tone of voice too innocent to be true. Draco scrunched up his face in confusion, shaking his head hastily.

"No, of course not Harry. It takes a great deal of time and practice to learn all of that. Why?" He asked.



“Do you *want* to learn? Are you interested in learning them?” Harry asked him back.

Draco glared at him, obviously not getting the idea. “What the hell— What kind of question is this Potter?” He demanded. Harry laughed again, giving him a lopsided grin in return.

“Well... Just watching Moody do those Unforgivable curses gave me a rather interesting incentive...” Harry said, looking thoughtful.

“For what?” Draco asked, looking at him in avid interest.

“For *learning* the Dark arts. I want to learn Draco. I want to learn how I could kill that fucking bastard who killed my parents. I want to know how to defend myself. To be powerful and advanced in magic. I *need* to learn the Dark arts, Draco...”

Draco looked at him, his jaw hanging open and his silver eyes widening in shock. “Are you mad, Harry?! Do you have any idea what would happen if we get caught?! What the fuck will Sirius, our teachers, Dumbledore and most of all, *AJ* say?!” He burst out.

Harry narrowed his eyes, snorting derisively. “*We?*” He asked as he cocked an eyebrow at the other Slytherin in front of him. Draco shot him an impish, slightly sheepish grin.

"Of course. You didn't think I'd let you go with this alone. If you're going to train yourself with the dark arts to gain power, so will I." Draco said. Harry smirked but nodded in amusement.

"What brought this on, Harry? I mean, we have learned some dark spells before but to learn the dark *arts*, we need not only to self-read those dark arts books but also a trainer. It's an extremely difficult form of magic, Harry." Draco told him.

Harry just shrugged, his eyes glinting with anger. "That bastard killed my parents... I want him dead... I don't care how I do it but I want him *dead*..." Harry whispered more to himself than Draco.

Draco looked at him for a moment, inspecting his features before he sighed and nodded. "Fine. I'll try to get my father to help us both out during summer after this year but as of now, we'll have to study on our own."

Harry looked at him in genuine surprise, not daring to believe the words that had just come out of his best friend's mouth. "So are you actually serious and willing to stay with me on this, Malfoy? You do know the consequences of this... I'm not forcing you into this." He said slowly.

Draco half-smiled at him and nodded. "As much as how badly you may think of me, Potter. I'd still have to say, I'm with you on this all the way. I'm your best friend Harry; you're stuck with me for life." He said, offering his hand.

Harry looked at it for a minute before grinning and taking it, both boys doing their handshake. "Thanks Draco, I appreciate this. I knew you wouldn't back out on me. Do you reckon we should start checking out the restricted section of the library soon?" He asked.

Draco laughed, shrugging nonchalantly. "If you say so, Potter. Just be sure we have your invisibility cloak for this." He said. Harry grinned and got up, heading towards the door.

Draco looked at him curiously, his eyes wide in surprise. "Where are you going? Don't tell me you're going to start now?" Harry smirked, shaking his head at him.

"Nah, of course not. I'm going to take a bath in the Prefects bathroom. It'll help me clear my head." Harry replied. Draco rolled his eyes and nodded, getting up and stretching his muscles out slightly.

"You're such a girl, Harry... I'm going to sleep. Night Potter. See you in the morning." He said, yawning and walking up to the boys' dorms. Harry nodded in acknowledgement, heading off towards the Prefects bathrooms.

The Prefect's bathroom had always been locked securely by a secret password known only by the Prefects of the school but Harry never really had a problem entering and leaving the place whenever he wanted to. He had always managed to figure out the password to the elegant bathroom since the prefects in the past had given it to him freely.

"Pine Fresh." He muttered under his breath, allowing the door of the bathroom to slide open and let him in to the lavishly smelling bathroom.

He casually glanced around the elegantly designed bathroom, a bored expression on his face before he closed the door and began to slip off his clothes slowly, beginning with his Hogwarts robes.

The blonde mermaid in the portrait near the tub giggled and began flashing her fins at him when she saw his muscle-toned physique, smiling and showing off. Harry rolled his eyes and walked over to turn on the warm water in the swimming-pool-sized, elegant marble tub, filling it with luscious green bubbles and removing his shirt.

He hurled the shirt over to the portrait of the mermaid, who stopped giggling immediately and just gaped at Harry as he sank into the tub, closing his eyes in relaxation.

*Damn... That feels good...* Harry thought as the warmth of the water began to loosen his tense muscles, relaxing him enough for him to lean his head back against the tub and savor the feeling.

Harry began drifting off into a light sleep as the mermaid continued to watch him, practically drooling. She didn't notice the figure that had just entered the bathroom, taking off a dark cloak and walking over to the tub to watch Harry silently.

Parvati Patil sighed to herself in bliss as she eyed Harry, whose eyes were closed as his body was only covered by the bubbles in the tub. *Damn... He has definitely got to be the hottest guy in the whole school...* Parvati thought as her eyes checked him out from head to toe.

She had been strolling around that night to get some fresh air, thinking about Harry when just her luck, Harry himself began sauntering down from the Slytherin dungeons heading for the Prefects bathroom.

She knew that confident, sexy stride from anywhere so she decided to duck into the shadows and follow him.

*It was the perfect opportunity for me to be alone with him... And to make him mine...* Parvati had thought excitedly as she raced after him.

It had taken all of her self-control not to grab him and kiss him madly but she had managed it until they had made it to the Prefects bathroom and Harry had slipped inside.

Now as she stared at this raven-haired god in front of her, she couldn't help noticing how her breath had suddenly gone rapid just by staring at his beautiful form.

*Dear Merlin... He is gorgeous...* She thought as she looked at him. A damp lock of his silky, raven hair had fallen into his eyes and his tempting lips were just calling out to her.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had walked behind him and began massaging his shoulders.

*Damn...His shoulders are as firm as rock...* She thought in admiration as she gently massaged them with her delicate hands.

Harry's eyes flew open immediately, narrowing themselves in suspicion and slight irritation. "Patil..." He said confidently, taking one of her hands off his shoulder and inspecting it for a brief second.

"How could you tell it was me, Harry?" Parvati purred, her voice in a low, seductive tone.

Harry paused and narrowed his eyes for a minute before he slowly quirked his lips into a sexy smile, his fingers stroking her hand gently. "Nobody else would have the effect on me as you do." He teased, planting a kiss on her hand.

Parvati giggled and coyly yanked her arm away, running her fingers through his silky hair, which was damp with water. "That's a lie, Harry Potter and you know it." Parvati said teasingly, gently hitting the back of his head.

Harry let out a sexy chuckle, causing Parvati's knees to buckle weakly before he slowly turned around in the tub so that he faced her. "Aren't you supposed to be asleep right now, young lady?" He asked, an eyebrow raised in a mock disapproving manner.

Parvati giggled again, tossing her hair over her shoulder, loving every moment of having Harry tease her that way. "So I snuck out of bed, sue me. I've been a bad, bad girl. What are you going to do about it, Mr. Potter?" She said, pouting.

Harry slowly let his eyebrow down and lifted one side of his lips into a seductive half-smile. "Yes you have... Sneaking out of your dorms this late at night... Following an innocent, unsuspecting victim, attacking him in the middle of his bath in the bathroom and..." Harry trailed off, a teasing glint in his eye.

Parvati looked at him quizzically, waiting for him to continue.

"And?"

"Stealing a guy's heart behind his back... You're a sly Gryffindor, aren't you Parvati? I might have to punish you for that..." Harry drawled in a low tone of voice, his eyes narrowing and a sneer forming on his handsome face.

Parvati felt her heart beating nervously as Harry took one of her hands again, intertwining his fingers with hers. "Oh really? And just how innocent are you?" She flirted, raising an eyebrow at him mischievously.

"Innocent as a pure, white dove." Harry said, his eyes wide with mock innocence. Parvati giggled at him, amused and slightly intimidated by his fast but enticing antics.

“A guy has no chance against you... Have you no mercy at all? What are you going to do to me now that you’ve caught me with my guard down?” Harry asked in a mock-scared manner, causing Parvati to giggle nervously again.

“Hmm... I’ll have to think about it Harry... After all... It’s not everyday I catch the hottest guy in school unprepared.” Parvati teased again, playing with his hand.

Harry laughed lightly, highly amused by her behavior. “And it isn’t everyday I get mugged in the middle of my bath by the most beautiful girl I know.” He countered, stepping forward.

Before Parvati could react, Harry had yanked her forward into the tub, causing her to scream slightly in surprise as she fell into the warm water, clothes and all. When she surfaced, Harry was smirking at her in amusement as she sputtered with anger.

“Harry!! Why did you do that?!” Parvati demanded in mild indignation, pouting at him. Harry gave her his lopsided grin and pulled her close to him, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“So I could do *this*.” He said simply, roughly pulling her to him and giving her a hard, an aggressive kiss on the mouth. Parvati felt her heart jump up and down in circles as she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him back as her head spun around in dizzy circles.

When they pulled back, Parvati was out of breath and her lips felt swollen from such a rough kiss. Nevertheless, she flashed Harry her



gorgeous smile. Harry leered at her, looking amused and enticed at the same time, his emerald eyes glinting in lust.

He slowly began to circle her in the water, moving like a shark about to advance on his prey. "I'm glad you're here, Parvati... I knew it was you following me all along... You can't fool me... I've had my eye on you for a long time now..." He whispered into her ear, causing a shiver to run down her spine.

Harry again wrapped his strong arms around her slim waist from behind and pulled her to him until her back was pressed up against his bare chest. "Question is, why did we wait so long to realize each other? Why did we wait so long for this..." He murmured again, planting a kiss on her cheek, trailing it slowly down to her neck.

Parvati shivered again in delight and leaned back against him, closing her eyes in the sensation. "Maybe it wasn't our time then... Harry..." She whispered, wrapping her arms around herself nervously.

Harry pulled her closer, leaning in to whisper something to her again. "Well we could make it our time now... That is... If you want to..." He said, stroking her cheek. Parvati sighed as she felt him kiss her cheek again.

*I never imagined he would open up to me like this so easily... I guess he's had these hidden feelings for me too...* She thought happily. As Harry turned her around and began to lean in again, Parvati nervously pushed him slightly away, realizing that this boy was going way too fast.

She needed to find her control over him if she ever expected to get him to really care about her. “Not so fast Harry...” She said in a flirtatious manner, wagging a finger at him playfully.

Harry raised an eyebrow, obviously not at all amused by her behavior. “I’m not giving in to you just yet... You’ll just have to suffer first Slytherin boy...” She teased. Harry calmly narrowed his eyes and let out his famous smirk.

“What? Are you playing hard-to-get now, Parvati? I’m sorry, I don’t play that game at all, baby...” He said coldly, moving away abruptly from her but Parvati hastily reached out for him.

“Harry... I didn’t mean it that way... But don’t you think... We should get to know each other better before we start to get... intimate? I mean, we just started realizing how we felt about each other now...” She pointed out.

“But baby... Why would you want to wait around for those stupid get to know you phases when we could have this?” Harry asked seductively as he gave her a quick, breathtaking kiss on the lips.

“Harry—”

“And this?” He asked, kissing her again, this time longer and harder.

“Harry—”

“Or this?” He repeated, this time pulling her to him and kissing her passionately, pressing their bodies closer against each other. Parvati felt herself and all that was left of her womanly pride melting away as Harry deepened the kiss, making her lose herself in the moment.

*The boy of my dreams is actually kissing me... Harry Potter is actually saying he likes me... He's bloody interested in me... I knew he couldn't resist me...* She thought. In spite of her happiness however, she couldn't help but feel nervous at the same time. Harry was unlike all the other boys she had dated before.

She had always managed to have the upper hand on them all the time. She was always in control and in charge but with Harry... It was the other way around. He just seemed too dominant, aggressive and uncontrollable for her.. He had a different mind of his own.

*Well fine... I'll just have to deal with him like that then...I could live with him being that way... Just as long as he loves me, I'll be fine...* She thought as Harry pulled her to him, crushing her against him, kissing her with so much intensity that Parvati felt faint with exhilaration.

*He's mine now... Harry James Potter is finally mine...* She thought as she entangled her fingers through his hair, pulling his face to hers to deepen the kiss even more just as Harry's hand had begun tugging on her shirt....

Harry lazily snuck back into the Slytherin Common Room five hours later, his hair still damp as it glistened with droplets of water. He yawned and ran a hand through his disheveled hair, which Parvati had messed up when they said goodbye.

He chuckled as he thought of the beautiful Gryffindor girl he was with earlier. He had no doubt that she would definitely take his mind off things for a while. She would be a great, fun way to blow off some of his time every now and then.

As always, the girl seemed to be really taken in by him, looking at him with that lovesick, puppy dog face. A face so full of love, trust and complete admiration... Harry winced in disgust as he collapsed on the armchair, exhausted.

*Acting like you're in love with a girl just to get some action is tiring work...* Harry thought, laughing to himself. He had to admit, Parvati was indeed a very beautiful girl and she would be a lot of fun for the coming days. He was sure she would satisfy him for at least a week or so before he dumped her. The girl was just too damn easy.

A little sweet talk and a flash of a smile was more than enough to make her give in to him physically. Based on how she was blabbering on and on to him just earlier, she had actually developed the insane idea that Harry was madly in love with her... Which was in fact, Harry had to admit, what he had meant for her to believe all along.

*Girls were much easier to manipulate if you continue giving them the perception that you're their long lost prince charming...* Harry thought, chuckling softly to himself at the idea.

*It was amusing actually...* How easy those girls turned to putty in his hands. They always were a great way to amuse himself. Hell, Parvati had even taken the liberty of following him to the bathroom, which had definitely surprised him to say the least.

*Besides... She'd be another great addition to my list of past, beautiful girlfriends...Just a side step to my real challenge...* He thought, thinking about Hermione.

Harry didn't really know why but he was just so damn intent on seducing that little know-it-all Gryffindor.... It was probably because he was getting so damn frustrated at the way she seemed to resist him. As much as he hated to admit it, the girl was indeed getting to him and if he didn't nail her soon, he would go crazy. It had never taken him this long to get a girl before...

*Am I losing my touch?* He thought, his eyes widening in slight trepidation. ...*Nah...Granger will cave in soon... And Draco will be eating my dust 'and' his words in no time...* He concluded, chuckling. *I should probably just satisfy myself with Parvati for now... Let loose... Have a bit of fun... Great way to blow off my boring extra time...*He thought carelessly, standing up and heading off to the boys' dorms.

Halfway there, he stopped abruptly and thought to himself. *On second thought...*He headed over to the girls' dorms, wincing as he heard Millicent's loud, unladylike snores.

He rolled his eyes in disgust before he walked over to his twin's bed where he saw her sleeping peacefully, a small smile on her face.

Harry allowed himself a smile in the darkness of the room, gently pushing away a lock of hair from her face.

AJ stirred slightly, shifting her position. Harry smiled again, climbing into the bed next to his twin and wrapping an arm around her, pulling her to him just like always used to do when they were children.

AJ mumbled something, breathing deeply and unknowingly snuggling against her twin, resting her head on his chest. Harry yawned and kissed her on the forehead, removing his silver-framed glasses and putting it on the nightstand.

“Good night sis...” He whispered to her before he falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

**A/N:** Sorry to those of you who hated that Harry/Parvati scene but unfortunately, it truly had to be done. And yes...I realize that Parvati is a bitch in this story... sighs But...Yet again, it has to be done. ... Oh and before I forget, **PLEASE REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 10- Beauxbatons and Durmstrang

AJ yawned and opened her eyes slowly, her vision blurred as she looked around her in a slight daze. Slowly, two other, familiar emerald orbs came into focus, watching her silently in the darkness. AJ smiled and immediately snuggled up to the person beside her, hugging him tightly.

"Good morning, big brother."

Harry returned the smile and kissed her on the forehead, shutting his eyes again sleepily. "Morning..." He grumbled, yawning as well and stretching in his sleep.

"What are you doing here? When did you sneak in?" AJ asked her brother as he began playing with her hair gently.

"I just thought you of sleeping next to you last night. We hardly get to sleep on the same bed at all when we're at school anyway and after what happened yesterday, I thought you might need someone to be there beside you as you sleep." He said softly, a concerned frown on his handsome features.

AJ flashed her brother an affectionate grin, her heart melting at her brother's concern for her. "You're the best brother in the world, jerk-face... Did you know that?" She said, pinching his cheek playfully.

Harry mock growled but he couldn't help but let out an amused smile, shaking his head. "Yeah I know but don't you let it get out or my reputation would be ruined." He kidded, ruffling her hair in an affectionate manner.

AJ scowled, slapping his hand away and letting out a frustrated sigh.

"Hey, watch the hair, jerk-face! You have any idea how hard it is to maintain long hair?" She growled. Harry sniggered, his lips forming into his familiar smirk.

"It's not like I could mess it up even more. You should check out your hair in the morning, you look like a big, ugly troll." He said snidely, still shaking with laughter.

"You're no prince charming, yourself, *jerk-face*." AJ snapped back jokingly, messing her brother's immaculate hair up, giggling as he trashed around in protest.

"Hey, stop it! You're messing up the do!!" Harry yelled out, lunging for his sister in mock anger. He sneered evilly and began tickling his sister again, causing her to stop and giggle uncontrollably, wildly twisting around in protest.

"Harry, stop it! That tickles!! Stop it!" She screeched, laughing loudly as Harry continued to tickle her, laughing himself at her prone, helpless form.



Harry laughed again and gave up, hugging his sister tightly as she tried to catch her breath. The two hugged each other in silence for a moment, lost in their own thoughts before AJ finally spoke up.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?" Harry replied gently, looking at his sister expectantly. She looked away, snuggling closer to him. "... Thanks"

"For what?" Harry asked curiously.

"For just... being there always. For always taking care of a troublesome, helpless brat like me." She whispered, her eyes dropping down in shame. Harry felt his icy exterior melt for a moment as his arms tightened around his sister slowly.

"You don't have to thank me AJ... I may not always show it but I love so much... I don't know what I'd do if I lost you... I'll always be there...We're all we have now...And I'm sure mom and dad would have wanted us to love each other too... you know that right?" Harry said gently.

AJ nodded silently, a single tear escaping her eye and trickling slowly down her cheek. Harry caught it with his thumb and wiped it away, meeting his twin's eye. "I love you too, big brother..." AJ murmured softly, her words rather soft as she buried her face in her twin's chest.

Harry held her for a minute before he pulled back and looked at her directly in the eye.

"AJ...Do you...Am I... Does it matter much to you if I'm...I'm the biggest jerk in Hogwarts... I mean...Do you...do you care?" He asked, biting his lip uncertainly.

AJ gave him a teary smile. "You're the biggest jerk in England actually." She kidded slightly, shaking in suppressed giggles at his stunned expression. Harry looked surprised but grinned and hugged her tightly again.

"I just want you to know that whatever I do, whoever bitch I'm with this week or anything else I get involved in, it won't change the way I love you. Okay?" He asked.

AJ nodded, speechless as she tightened her arms around him in a reassuring hug to answer his question. The two once again fell into silence under the blanket until they heard the door to the room creak open and footsteps enter the room.

"Hey Harry? You in here?" They heard Draco's familiar, obviously annoyed voice. Harry smirked and pulled back from AJ, putting a finger to his lips to indicate her to keep quiet.

AJ held back her laughter and did as he said. Sooner or later, just as they had expected, they heard Lila's excited squeal and Draco's loud groan.

"Drakie-poo! What are you doing in here?" She exclaimed happily, jumping from her bed. AJ and Harry heard her excited footsteps as she jumped on Draco, a loud thud being heard on the floor a couple of moments later.

"Agh! Lila, get the fuck off me! I'm just here to look for Harry!" They heard Draco protest loudly, sounding slightly muffled.

"*Harry?* What on earth would he be doing in here? This is the *girls'* dorms!" Lila said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Draco didn't answer as the twins heard his heavy footsteps heading for AJ's bed. The next thing they knew, Draco had yanked down the blanket, exposing the face of both AJ and Harry, identical smirks on their lips.

"*Aaaagh!!*"

AJ groaned as she heard Lila's shrill scream, her ears stinging with the sharpness of her voice. Both Pansy and Millicent bolted up from their beds, screaming along in surprise with Lila as they girls hurried to cover up their sheer nightgowns with their blankets.

Draco, who was now fully dressed in his Hogwarts robes, started laughing loudly, shaking his head in amusement as Harry glared at him.

"Harumph!! It's not like it'll matter to *any* of you if he sees you, he's pretty much seen everything you have anyway!" AJ snapped out loud, grabbing the nearest thing she could reach and hurling it in the direction of Lila's bed. Draco held back a round of laughter at that.

"*Harry??*" Pansy asked in surprise, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"Of course it's me, you bitch. Who else would it be?!" Harry retorted, his eyes flashing with irritation and annoyance.

"What the bloody hell are you doing in the girls' dorms?!" Lila demanded shrilly, yanking away the covers from the twins' forms.

"Hey!!" AJ protested as the comforting warmth of the blanket left her shivering slightly from the cold. Draco immediately stopped laughing and flushed a dark red, hastily looking away from AJ, who was in her delicate knee-length nightgown, long legs slightly exposed.

"What the *fuck* are *you* staring at, Malfoy?!" AJ suddenly snapped, her green eyes flashing as they riveted on Draco's uncomfortable frame. Draco coughed and looked away, trying to hide the growing blush on his face. "I have *never* seen anybody look *that* hideous in the morning..." He managed, looking back at her to flash a smirk.

AJ flushed in humiliation but didn't say anything, pulling the hem of her skirt down as she sought to cover herself up with another blanket. "You're one to talk...I'd like to see how *you* look like in the morning." She snapped back, narrowing her eyes at him. Draco only mock smiled and looked away, shaking his head.

"Like what you see, Perrine?" Harry suddenly spoke up snidely, a self-satisfied smirk on his face as he noticed the well-implied looks Lila was sending his way. AJ couldn't help but giggle as Pansy shrieked in pure bliss and ran over to him, throwing her arms around him.

"*Harrykins!*" She squealed, smothering his face with kisses. "Pansy, get off me! Get off, dammit! I got to shower!" Harry protested irritably, struggling away from her.

Pansy didn't hear this, continuing to kiss him until Harry finally got pissed off and shoved her roughly away from him, jumping up from the bed and grabbing his shirt which he had left on the floor.

"Harry, that hurt!" Pansy whined, pouting up at Harry, who ignored her and leaned down to give his sister a kiss on the forehead.

"I'll see you later, sis. I'm going to take a shower now." He said before he walked out of the room.

"You can stop staring now, Malfoy." AJ finally said, a teasing but friendly smile on her face as she absently tried to pull her skirt lower to cover her legs from Draco's scrutinizing eyes again.

Draco grinned back, trying desperately not to let his gaze travel to her legs at the moment, letting his gaze linger on her face.

"*Staring?* You wish, Potter.... Why don't you just go and take a shower? That way you might have a chance of looking halfway decent." He retorted easily, ignoring Lila, who was linking her arm through his.

AJ mock scowled at him as she got up, flipping her hair over her shoulder haughtily in a mock-insulted manner. "Thanks a lot...You know, you have a really funny way of showing your *feelings*...Drakie-poo..." She kidded, putting an added emphasis on the word "feelings."

Draco's face suddenly turned an interesting shade of pink. "Feelings?! What the hell are you talking about, Potter?! I don't have any feelings for a skinny little troll like you! I—" AJ finally laughed, cutting off his ranting.

"I was kidding, Drac! Merlin...You'd think I'd have struck a nerve somewhere in that cold heart of yours with you running your mouth off like that... Talk about defensive." AJ said, still laughing as she got up and headed for the showers.

Draco glared after her, his silver eyes boring into her back. "Stupid idiot..." He muttered under his breath just as AJ passed him, causing the girl to smirk and wink at him in response. Despite himself, Draco couldn't help but smile.

"Hey, uhm, AJ?" Draco called to her back, causing the girl to stop abruptly and whirl around, giving him a half-irritated, half-expectant look.

"Yes, Draco?" She asked, her eyes looking curiously at him.

*Come on, all you have to do is ask her out. Just say something and ask her out...Come on, Malfoy! Work it! She's just a girl!* A voice encouraged inside his head. Draco took a deep breath and faced her again, giving the girl his heartbreaker smile.

"Potter, I was wondering...That is, if you're not too busy of course... I was wondering if you'd like to—"

Draco never got to finish his sentence as he felt Lila jumping on him and tugging impatiently at his arm away from AJ, causing the blonde to growl and turn to give her his meanest glare in response.

AJ laughed as she watched the two of them, shaking her head in both amusement and disgust.

"Hey, don't let *me* interrupt anything... Go right ahead, Li... Oh no, but wait a minute, hold that thought... At least, while I'm still in the room..." She teased, still laughing as she began gathering her things and heading for the bathroom.

Draco's jaw dropped, his eyes flashing for a split second. "No, AJ, it's not like that! Lila here is—"

"Aw come on, AJ... Leave us alone and let Drakie-poo and I have our fun...I'll see you at the Great Hall." Lila interrupted mischievously, winking at the other girl.

AJ made a face but grinned and shrugged, turning to look at Draco again, who looked completely pissed off at having to wrestle Lila's eager hands from exploring too much of himself.

"Oh and before I forget, was there something you wanted to ask me, Draco?" AJ asked and strangely, she felt a pang of intense regret and hurt when she saw Lila groping him again.

Draco opened his mouth to say something again but the other girl cut him off again, jumping in front of him to address AJ. "Nothing, AJ. Go take your shower now. Drakie and I need some time alone." She insisted, shoving AJ towards the shower room.

"But, hey! I-" Draco didn't hear the rest of AJ's sentence as Lila shut the door, cutting off the other girl abruptly.

"Perrine, you are such an annoying bitch!" Draco snapped impatiently, shoving Lila away from him roughly and making a move for the door but Lila caught his arm again and pulled him back to her, pouting.

Draco finally sighed in defeat and absently didn't bother to protest as Lila began kissing him persistently, running her hands through his silky, silver-blond hair.

"Ugh... Gross. You two go on ahead, I'm going to go join Harry in the shower." Pansy, who had finally recovered from Harry's shove, said in disgust as she watched Lila take full advantage of Draco, who looked as though he didn't even know what the hell was happening around him.



"I swear, Lav, I'm in love!" Parvati sighed blissfully as she sat on her four-poster bed in the Gryffindor girl's dormitories the next morning.

Hermione groaned and buried her head under her pillow as Parvati raved on and on about her latest so-called "*date*" last night with some new poor boy she just hooked up with. She and Lavender had been gossiping the whole morning since 5AM after Parvati had walked late into the room. Hermione hadn't gotten any sleep since then.

"I cannot believe you snuck out late at night and met up with that jerk Potter last night and in the *prefects bathroom* of all places!" Lavender said in disgust, shaking her head.

*Harry and Parvati?! Prefects bathroom?!* Hermione thought, her eyes popping open in shock when she heard Harry's name. She bolted up from her bed so fast that Parvati and Lavender both shrieked in surprise.

"Hermione! What the bloody hell are you trying to do? Give us a heart attack?!" Lavender snapped at her, taking a deep breath to calm herself down.

"You met up with Harry in the prefect's bathroom?!" Hermione asked Parvati, her voice a high-pitched squeak, ignoring Lavender's annoyed look.

Parvati looked surprised at Hermione's question but recovered quickly, flashing the girl a lovesick smile. "Boy... Did we ever... I swear, Hermione, this is one amazing guy... He was so charming and

gorgeous and sexy... And he's *mine*... All *mine*..." She gushed, sighing wistfully as she stared off into space with stars in her eyes.

Hermione stared at her in shocked silence, her jaw hanging open and something unreadable flashing in her eyes. Both Lavender and Parvati didn't seem to notice. Lavender snorted derisively, examining her nails in a bored manner.

"Yeah right... I give you guys less than one week, Parv. You won't get anywhere with him at all." Lavender said confidently, brushing her hair as she talked.

Parvati snapped out of her daydream and rolled her eyes as she got up and started to change into her Hogwarts robes. "You're just jealous, Lavender. Because he's in love with *me* and not with *you*." She said smugly, buttoning her robes in front of her mirror.

Hermione jerked back into attention, standing up and walking over to Parvati hastily with an unreadable look in her eyes. "But Parv, Lavender is right! Harry won't do you any good at all! The guy is just using every female he hooks up with as a play toy." Hermione rushed out in a fast sentence, wringing her hands tensely.

*I can't believe I even care!* Hermione thought to herself but she ignored that thought, looking at Parvati desperately. Parvati narrowed her eyes at the other girl, suspicion clearly showing in her eyes.

"Since when did *you* think you knew so much about *Harry*, Hermione?" She asked suspiciously. Hermione gulped and fell back down on the bed, hastily trying to conjure up an answer.

"Does it really matter?! Harry or Potter, or whoever the hell he is, he's still the same self-centered bastard who has this warped perception that the world revolves around him! Don't you find it odd that he could dump all those other girls in school so fast? He could dump you just as easily." Hermione pointed out, a scowl forming on her pretty features.

Parvati just laughed confidently, styling her silky hair perfectly with her delicate hands. "Harry's told me all about them. He said they never meant anything to him at all. He's never loved any of them like he does me." She said haughtily, eyebrow raised in satisfaction.

"And you actually *believed* him?!" Lavender exclaimed in disbelief, obviously trying hard not to laugh.

Parvati looked mildly offended. "Well, of course I did! Why wouldn't I?" She snapped back irritably. Hermione felt as though someone had kicked her right in the gut.

*What the hell does he mean he LOVES her? He doesn't LOVE Parvati! How could he love a girl like HER? He can't love anyone! What is he trying to pull, hitting on me then going for Parvati?! She thought indignantly, her hands closing themselves into angry fists.*

*She couldn't be good for him anyway! Harry doesn't need to be with someone like HER!* Hermione added sullenly, her scowl deepening as she snatched her towel angrily from her closet.

"Love you?! Parv, that was the same thing he told *me*! He's just using you!" Lavender told her, standing up and slipping into her robes as well.

Parvati just giggled as she carefully applied her make-up flawlessly on her face. "Just because Harry never liked you as much as you liked him, Lav, doesn't mean you have to badmouth him to the girl he really likes." Parvati reasoned.

This time, both Hermione and Lavender's jaw dropped open, both girls turning to look at Parvati sharply. "What exactly did Harry tell you?" Lavender asked darkly, her eyes slowly glinting in unmistakable anger.

"That you were extremely tacky and an air-headed bitch and that he only dated you because you asked him to."

"He said *WHAT?*"

Parvati laughed again as she flicked her hair over her shoulder arrogantly, winking at her own reflection, who winked back at her. "He also said that you had the worst legs he's ever seen in his life." She said, giggling.

Lavender sputtered with indignation, her face burning red with anger and humiliation.

"T-That *Jerk!!*"

"Ah...That he is but he's *my* jerk and don't you forget it, Lav..." Parvati just grinned at her reflection again as Lavender bolted into the bathroom, obviously pissed off as she slammed the door loudly.

Parvati hardly noticed, too busy admiring her reflection in the mirror to pay attention to her best friend's anger. "You are going to steal some hearts today, girl!" Her reflection had gushed to her with a cheery smile.

Parvati grinned wider, a pretty blush rising into her cheeks. "Let's hope, Harry thinks so too!" She replied cheerfully.

Hermione snarled and followed Parvati as she headed outside to the Gryffindor Common Room where Ron, Seamus and the rest of the other boys were hanging around already in their wrinkled pajamas, their hair an unruly, tangled mess and with extremely sleepy expressions on their faces.

"Parvati, don't you think you're going a bit too fast into this? I mean, a Gryffindor dating a Slytherin, especially *Harry Potter*, is a big step isn't it? I mean, how could you get together and sleep together in one night?!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Because we were *meant* to be together, Hermione. Harry and I are like two sides of the same coin... Coffee and cream, bread and butter and all that shit. People like us just *click*." She answered, her tone confident and sure of herself.

Hermione panicked, feeling rather desperate and ran up in front of the other girl, both her hands raised to block her way. "But think of his reputation! Look how fast he dumped Cho Chang! Or your best friend Lavender! Or even that extremely pretty Ravenclaw prefect, Denise?" Hermione persisted, her eyes wide and panicked.

Parvati raised an eyebrow at her in annoyance. "Hermione, would you mind getting out of my way? And as I said, they all meant nothing to him. He told me they were all children. *I'm* the one he's ever wanted all this time." She snapped.

"Parv! What would his girlfriend, Pansy say?!" Hermione squeaked again, holding Parvati's arm back from walking around her. Parvati scowled at her, yanking her arm away from the other girl.

"Pansy is *not* his girlfriend now. I am. He told me that he and Pansy broke up a long time ago but she just kept clinging on to him until now because she couldn't accept the fact Harry doesn't want her anymore. That's all there is to it." Parvati said defensively.

*Then fine! How about that Harry is constantly making his moves on me?!* Hermione thought about screaming but she really didn't think that was a bright idea to say to Parvati.

"Where are you going anyway, Herm? Aren't you going to shower? You're in my way. I have to go see Harry." Parvati said in annoyance as Hermione blocked her way once again, smiling nervously at the girl in front of her.

"Parv, I only want what's best for you and I personally think that you and Harry would *not* match. You're not the type of girl that would suit him!" Hermione burst out, exasperated.

Parvati stopped abruptly and narrowed her eyes at the other girl. "Now what is *that* supposed to mean, Hermione? That I'm not good enough for Harry? Is that it?" She asked angrily.

Hermione faltered slightly, finally realizing what she had just said. "No... I only meant.... That... You just don't seem to be the type of girl he would... fall for..." She said in a slow manner, trying to choose her words wisely.

Parvati's eyes flashed as she glared the other girl down in absolute rage and hatred. "Oh?! And exactly just who would he fall for? Someone like *you*? Is that what you're trying to say? Is there something I should know, Hermione?" She asked warily,

Hermione froze, her eyes wide with surprise and denial. "N-no!! Of course not! I'm only concerned! I mean, what if he plays you around just like he did those other girls? You're my friend too, Parv and I don't want to see that happen!" She returned defensively, turning an interesting shade of red.

*And the winner of this year's worst lie is...* A nagging voice inside Hermione said, irritating her even more. Parvati didn't look convinced.

"Hmm... You've never seemed to take an interest in my love life before..." She said doubtfully.

"Well, exactly, that's why I'm trying to warn you now. I don't want you to get hurt or anything since you're my friend too, right?" Hermione countered.

*Did I also mention I'm a terrible liar?* The voice said inside Hermione's head said again but she ignored it, a stab of immense irritation welling up inside her. Parvati still looked a bit suspicious but she gave Hermione a cautious smile.

"Well thanks, Hermione but I think I would know what's best for me. I appreciate the concern, though." She said, nodding and walking around the other girl.

Parvati wrinkled her nose at the sight of all the other Gryffindor boys looking all rumpled and creased in the morning, yawning and walking around sleepily in the common room.

"Ugh! You guys are all so unsophisticated! Why can't you be more like Harry?" Parvati screeched, making the boys all wince at her high tone of voice.



Ron made a disgusted face at her. "If we were more like *Harry*, then we would all be self-centered jerks with nothing between the ears except for air." He said spitefully, rolling his eyes as he ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

Parvati frowned at him. "Don't think that just because you're my friend, Ron, that I'm going to be hiding everything you say about my boyfriend behind his back. Watch what you say about him from now on." She threatened.

Ron and Seamus both dropped their jaws and stared at Parvati in loathing. "Boyfriend?! Parvati, you and Potter? Ew..." They chorused, grimacing.

Parvati made an annoyed tutting sound before she flicked her hair over her shoulder and flashed them a smile. "You don't have to be jealous, boys. You both just aren't my type..." She said, grinning as she walked out of the room.

All the boys stared after her in stunned silence, shaking their heads. "Parvati sure is one clueless idiot." Seamus said bitterly, his eyes darkening dangerously.

*Tell me about it...* Hermione thought in defeat, sighing helplessly as she walked back up the stairs to take a shower.

*Besides, why do I even care? It's not as though I like Harry or anything... He's nothing... He and Parvati would make a perfect pair...* She thought darkly.

*Of course they would... Why wouldn't they be? He's so handsome and she's so beautiful and they're both extremely popular... Both vain too. They're a perfect match.* Hermione said to herself, her bitterness getting the better of her.

She was snapped out of her thoughts when she almost ran into Lavender, who was coming out of the shower room, the dark scowl still on her pretty features.

"Where's Parv? Did she go and meet up with her new boyfriend?" She asked, rolling her eyes. Hermione nodded miserably in helpless agreement, a scowl forming on her face as she pushed past the other girl to the shower room.

"Yeah... She went to meet up with her new...*boyfriend*..."

"Harry, what exactly did you tell, Sirius?" Draco asked as the two Slytherins ran down the corridor later that morning towards the owlery.

"I told you, Draco. I had to get his word about why AJ and I heard mom's voice while we saw Moody cast that curse on that spider the other day. I also told him about that time during summer when my fucking scar hurt." Harry explained impatiently as they rounded a corner.

"Your scar hurt? Why didn't you tell AJ about it? Did her scar hurt as well?" Draco asked again, his eyes darkening with confusion.

"No, I didn't tell her about it, Draco. Stop asking too many fucked up questions! I didn't want her worrying about it and it's not as if I can't handle it, right? I didn't think much of it that time but now, I'm not so sure. I reckon Voldemort is planning something." Harry said darkly as he whispered a spell, which caused the door of the owlery to bang open.

Draco followed Harry inside where Hedwig had landed on the windowsill, looking very pleased with herself. Harry stroked her gently before he relieved her of the letter tied to her leg, helping her back up to where the other owls were. Hedwig hooted her thanks and flew over to sit next to Draco's male eagle owl. Draco read over Harry's shoulder at the Sirius' familiar handwriting, their eyes skimming lightly across the parchment.

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm heading there right now. What you just told me about your scar hurting during the summer and you and AJ having these voices of your mother in your heads during the Cruciatus curse is definitely a bad sign. I have an extremely uneasy feeling that Voldemort will be planning something soon. He is out there, Harry... I know he is. He's just waiting for the right opportunity to strike. For the meantime, we all have to be on alert. You did the right thing in not telling your sister. I wouldn't want her to worry just now, you know how she is. If your scar hurts again, just head straight to Dumbledore. Also, with Mad-Eye moody there, I think you can be sure as hell you'll be guarded. I'll be in touch soon. Take care of your sister, okay? You and Draco stay out of trouble. Be careful Harry. I'll be seeing you soon.*

## *Sirius*

Harry cursed out loud and crumpled up the letter into an angry ball, his shoulders tensing with fury. "He's coming here? Is he fucking *crazy*?! He could get caught!" Draco said, his eyes wide.

"I shouldn't have told him!!" Harry yelled out loud, punching the wall violently with his fist. "What are you talking about, Harry? You did the right thing in telling him. He's your godfather; he has a right to know." Draco pointed out.

"I know but now that he knows, he's gotten the crazy idea he has to come back to protect me! He thinks I'm in fucking trouble! Dammit, I don't need help, I'm not helpless! He doesn't have to come back because of me! What if he gets caught?!" Harry snapped again, yanking out another piece of parchment from his robes and hastily scribbling a message onto it.

Draco didn't get the chance to read it as Harry was soon strapping it onto Hedwig's leg once again. Hedwig protested, being too tired from her previous journey so Draco beckoned his own owl, Aquila, over.

"Use him, Harry. He hasn't been on a delivery for a while." He said. Harry nodded and fastened the letter onto the owl's leg. As soon as he did, Aquila took off into the sky, moving with the grace and swiftness of an eagle as he flew out of sight.

“What did you tell him?” Draco asked as they walked back to the Great Hall, where everyone else was eating breakfast for that day. Harry sighed, brushing back a lock of hair that had fallen into his eyes, exposing the popular lightning bolt scar.

“I told him that I probably just imagined my scar hurting that summer and that he didn’t have to come see me because I can handle myself. I do not want him getting caught again because of me. I have enough problems as it is.” He grumbled to himself, his eyes narrowing.

Draco nodded silently, not saying anything about his best friend’s behavior until several first year Hufflepuffs passed by them in the corridor. Draco suddenly let out his sneer, elbowing Harry sharply in the ribs to get his attention.

Harry scowled and turned to face him but seeing the Hufflepuffs, his anger melted away and he smirked, raising an eyebrow. “I swear, Malfoy. You have a strange way of cheering me up.” He said, rolling his eyes.

Draco ignored him and directed one of his meanest, most intimidating Malfoy glares at the young Hufflepuffs, causing them all to widen their eyes in fear and walk faster, avoiding the two Slytherins in front of them.

Harry let out a secret grin to himself and whispered a spell he knew, causing the Hufflepuffs to sprout big, fluffy tails behind them, which they failed to notice as they entered the Great hall.

Draco and Harry both smirked as they soon heard the whole Great hall burst into uproarious laughter when they caught sight of the Hufflepuffs. The Hufflepuffs all burned bright red and bolted from the room in humiliation as the Hall, particularly the Slytherins, howled with laughter.

“Hey, why are you running away? I see no difference!” Blaise called out loudly from where he sat on the Slytherin table, causing his housemates to laugh even harder and the Hufflepuff table to throw him sharp glares.

“You Slytherins are such jerks!” Hannah Abbot, a fourth year Hufflepuff girl screamed out at them just as Harry and Draco took their seats on their table, her face red with indignation. The Slytherins ignored her, resuming back to whatever they had been doing, causing Hannah to redden even more and sit back down in embarrassment, shaking her head at herself.

She blushed darker when she saw Blaise throw her a mocking smile, causing the blonde girl to look down and accidentally drop her fork in nervousness. Blaise smirked in amusement and looked away, turning back to his food.

Justin Finch-Fletchley however, counting that he hated Harry ever since their second year in their dueling class, stood up and hurled a piece of bread at Harry, scowling in anger.

Harry saw this but barely paid any attention to it at all, yawning and turning over to talk to Draco as Crabbe caught the bread in mid-air and hurled it at back at Justin in retaliation. The other Slytherins flashed angry death glares at Justin in warning. Justin just flushed and sat back down, muttering to himself in embarrassment.

“Here comes your bitch—oops, I mean *girlfriend*, Harry.” Draco said, smirking as he caught sight of Parvati who had just entered the Great Hall with a big, goofy smile on her face.

Harry rolled his eyes to himself before turning and immediately plastering on a fake, sweet smile on his face just as she ran over to him and threw her delicate arms around his neck. “Good morning, sweetie! I missed you!” She purred, giving him a kiss on the cheek and planting herself down on his lap.

The reactions between the different people in the room seemed incredibly amusing to Draco. He watched as all the girls in the room narrowed their eyes darkly at Parvati and all the boys recoil in disgust. The girls Harry had gone through before had just rolled their eyes and shaken their heads at Parvati, feeling sorry for the poor girl.

*Harry Potter does it again...* Draco thought, leering as he watched Pansy’s eyes flash dangerously at Parvati.

“Hey baby... Is that the only kiss I get this morning?” Harry asked, flashing a puppy dog face at Parvati. Draco snorted and looked away, a disgusted grimace on his face. Parvati giggled and coyly tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Of course not, sweetie... It’s just that... Isn’t it a bit embarrassing right on front of all these people?” She asked, blushing delicately.

Harry rolled his eyes and pulled her closer to him, ignoring the glares and the looks of the people on the Slytherin table around them. “Let

them watch then..." He murmured, pulling her closer and giving her a hard kiss on the mouth, tightening his arms around her slender form.

Parvati absolutely melted at his touch, giving in to his demands despite the people watching them. "Ugh, would you cool it, Potter? There are other people around you too, in case you've forgotten." Draco snapped, a scowl of annoyance on his face.

Harry pulled back from Parvati and smirked at him, releasing his arms around Parvati so fast that she almost fell back in surprise. "Don't mind Drac, here, babe. He's just pissed off that he hasn't gotten a good lay these past few weeks." Harry retorted, causing the Slytherins boys around them to laugh loudly in agreement.

Draco narrowed his eyes in irritation at him, making the Slytherins laugh harder, shaking their heads. Parvati forced a laugh out, shifting around uncomfortably as she glanced around the other Slytherin boys around them. Strangely, she felt remotely out of place amidst so many Slytherins around her like this.

*What exactly did Harry mean by that?* She thought, wrinkling her forehead in confusion.

Frankly, she wasn't used to being around so many Slytherins boys before. It wasn't really a comfortable position for a Gryffindor to be in, especially if these Slytherin boys were the most notorious bad-boys in the school.

She wasn't so sure how she should act around them. They were completely different from the kind of boys she usually hung around



with. Those boys were always easy to wrap around her little finger... But...

She looked around to see Harry and Draco once again laughing around with another one of their friends—Blaise Zabini, whom, Parvati had to admit, was *definitely* a looker himself. Secretly smiling, she let her eyes travel down to check out Blaise's firm abs and muscles, traveling all the way up the gorgeous body till she reached the endearing spiked and highlighted dark hair.

*Well...I'll have to remember 'him' if ever Harry and I have an argument...* She thought to herself, holding back an amused giggle as she coyly dropped her eyes from the other boy and turned to look back at Harry again.

*But then again...There's always Mr. Malfoy over there as well...* She thought, slowly letting her gaze travel back to Draco's lean body before snapping them away again just as Harry turned to look at her.

Parvati met his emerald green eyes and gave the handsome Slytherin a smile, which the Slytherin briefly returned, giving Parvati a view of his dazzling pearly whites. *But no matter what...No one can compare to Harry Potter...* She thought dreamily, gripping his firm arm closer to herself.

*I'll have to watch myself with this one...* She thought smugly as she began cuddling up to her boyfriend, intertwining her fingers with his. "Harry? Can we go somewhere where we could be alone?" Parvati cooed, dropping feather-light kisses on his cheek.

Harry's eyes instantly converted themselves from amusement into annoyance, flashing dangerously like two lightning bolts. "Babe, not now." He snapped, pushing her away slightly, causing her to scowl as she got down from his lap and sat down on her own seat beside him.

Parvati clenched her hands into tight fists as Harry turned back to talk to his friends again, ignoring her completely as she crossed her arms over her chest and kept throwing disgruntled looks at him.

*I can't believe him! He's actually ignoring me! No one ignores Parvati Patil! Even if he 'is' the most handsome guy in school!* She raged inwardly in her head, trying to keep herself from exploding in anger.

"Can't fit in, can you?" A voice suddenly spoke up snidely, causing Parvati to whip her head up and narrow her eyes. Pansy Parkinson stared right back at her, a smug smile on her face, an eyebrow raised haughtily in satisfaction. Parvati returned the look with a smug smile that didn't seem to reach her cold eyes.

"I don't know what you mean, Parkinson." She said defensively, her eyes flashing. Pansy just laughed snootily, shaking her head in disbelief.

"You are just like those other girls that Harry supposedly dated. You don't mean a damn thing to him at all, you're just like a new added trophy to his collection. You're all the same to him." She drawled slowly, calmly examining her fingernails.

Parvati burned bright red and turned to look back at Harry, who was now smirking at something Draco was saying as the two of them kept glancing every once in a while at a pretty Ravenclaw sixth year right across from them.

"You're lying. That's not true. You're just jealous because Harry loves me. Not you. *Me.*" Parvati said stubbornly, a frown showing itself on her pretty features.

Pansy shrugged, smiling confidently and flicking her hair over her shoulder. "Say and believe what you want, Patil. He'll come back to me... He always does... I'm not worried at all." She said, flashing Parvati one last smile before she turned to whisper something to Lila, both of them giggling at Parvati.

Parvati felt her cheeks flare up in anger but she held it back as she muttered darkly under her breath. "She's right, you know." Another familiar female voice said softly, almost in a tone of pity.

Parvati tensed in suspicion and looked up to see AJ looking at her with a sorry look in her eyes. "Right about what?" Parvati demanded, glaring at the girl in front of her.

AJ looked back calmly at her, taking a sip from her goblet of juice before answering. "About Harry's intentions. Break up with him while you still can, Patil. It will save you the humiliation and the horrible experience of having *him* dump *you*." She said.

Parvati raised a single eyebrow

"Oh and I'm honored I have your concern Ms. Potter... And just when did you start caring about what happens to me?" She asked snidely. AJ chuckled, taking a delicate sip from her goblet of pumpkin juice.

“I’m not, Patil. Believe me. I’m just telling you the truth.” She said, giving the other girl an innocent look. Parvati narrowed her eyes at her, frowning as the other girl just gave her a smirk in return.

“I told you, bitch. You should have stayed away from him in the first place but you didn’t want to listen. You have no idea how stupid you are.” AJ continued, shaking her head at her.

Parvati stared at her in shock, too stunned to say anything at the moment. Fortunately, the Slytherin girl wasn’t finished. “Go back to Gryffindor, Patil. You don’t belong here at all.” She said coldly, giving Parvati a dark, menacing glare.

Before Parvati could say anything else, AJ had flicked her hair over her shoulder and had turned away, talking to Pansy. Parvati sighed and was about to stand up when she saw Dumbledore rise up from his seat and address the students in the room.

“Now, before you all head off to your respective classes, I have something to announce that I’m sure will excite all of you today.” He said, the all too familiar twinkle in his eye once again.

“As I’ve announced, the selected students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons are to arrive later this day after your last class has ended.” He started, causing a ripple of murmuring and whispers among the students.

“I am sure that you will all give your young guests and their headmasters a warm welcome later this evening. Enjoy the rest of

your day and a pleasant morning to you all.” Dumbledore finished, giving them all a wink before sitting back down on the table.

Parvati couldn't help but feel excited when she began hearing the other girls from the other table murmuring excitedly about the guests. “They're arriving today?! Why didn't Dumbledore tell us sooner?!” She exclaimed, earning her an annoyed glare from Harry.

“Whatever... It's no big deal anyway, we have a lot more important stuff to worry about, don't you agree?” He asked in a low voice, his arms finding their way around her waist. “Really? Like what?” Parvati asked, playing along as she batted her eyelashes at him flirtatiously.

Harry smirked and pulled her closer to him, ignoring AJ's reprimanding glare. “Like you and me... Tell me baby, exactly how do I make you feel when I hold you in my arms like this?” He asked, chuckling sexily.

Parvati felt her heart leap excitedly as Harry leaned in closer, their faces only mere inches apart. “Do you *really* want to know?” She purred, pushing away the lock of raven hair that had fallen into his emerald eyes.

Harry tensed for a moment, his eyes darkening with lust at the seductive action before he leaned in to whisper something in her ear. “You are such a fucking *tease*, you know that?” He growled, nibbling on her ear.

Before Parvati could answer, Harry caught her lips in a deep, searing kiss, wrapping his strong arms tighter around her waist. Parvati felt herself melt in his embrace, her heartbeat increasing rapidly as she

put her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to deepen the kiss.

*They're all jealous...All of them...Harry is 'mine'... Mine alone...* She thought, sighing to herself in bliss. The two were barely paying any attention at all to the people around them until Draco finally spoke up in irritation.

"I hate to interrupt your little snogging session, Potter, but just to tell you, we have exactly five minutes to get to our next class and I most certainly do *not* want to be late." Draco said sharply, checking his watch.

Harry pulled back immediately, causing Parvati to pop open her eyes in surprise. He looked at Draco in confusion. "Is that so? Well then, what would be our first class then, Malfoy?" He asked, checking his watch as well.

"*Your* first class is Divination while *my* first class is Arithmancy. We better get going; I wouldn't want to miss out on this." Draco said, gathering his books and standing up.

"You're such a geek, Malfoy. Besides, I'm not going to that bloody class anyway; I think I'll skip for today. I would much rather be spending my time with my hot girlfriend..." Harry said, raising his eyebrows up and down at Parvati suggestively.

Parvati flushed darkly but couldn't help but feel apprehensive at the suggestion. "Are you sure, Harry? I happen to have the same class

next, remember? And I particularly enjoy Divinations. Prof. Trelawney is my favorite teacher, wouldn't we miss out on a lot if we skip her class?" She asked worriedly.

Harry looked at her as if she was insane, laughing derisively at the very idea. "What? My little princess would rather be listening to some old bat instead of being with me? I thought you loved me, Parv..." Harry said, seductively running a hand up and down her shoulder.

Parvati bit her lip, not daring to look at him in the eye. Frankly, she had no idea what she was going to say to him. She knew she had to attend this class, but then again, if she didn't do what Harry wanted, he might dump her altogether. She couldn't handle that... Not at all...

"Think about it this way, babe... Who would you rather spend the rest of your day with? A bunch of boring old hags and Gryffindor bimbos with big thighs or me? Make your choice." Harry said sharply, his intense eyes burning a hole right through her as he spoke.

*Clearly, it doesn't look as though he's going to take no for an answer, that's for sure.* Parvati thought, shuddering excitedly at the forceful tone in his voice. She still had one more shot though.

"But Harry, I just assumed that since we both had the same class anyway.—"

"There's your mistake, babe. *Never* assume anything with me. *Never*. Besides, Divination bores me. We'll be much better off doing something productive while those idiots stare at a crystal ball, trying

to find an ugly-looking dog in all the smoke. What's it going to be, Parv?" Harry asked, resting his hands on both of her shoulders and looking at her intently.

AJ looked at her brother as though he had suddenly turned into a flobberworm.

"Harry! Are you crazy? You aren't going to class?! But—"

Harry held up a hand to silence his sister's sudden outburst, still looking at Parvati intently, as though giving her a secret challenge through the eyes. AJ snapped her jaw shut, glaring at her twin before she made an annoyed tutting sound and flicked her hair over her shoulder, turning away abruptly.

"Come on Draco, let's go. Prof. Vector won't appreciate it if we're late." AJ said, giving her twin brother an annoyed look before she stood up and stalked away, dragging a rather reluctant Draco behind her.

Harry ignored them, still looking intently at Parvati as though willing her to make her decision. Parvati sighed and shrugged, smiling slightly.

"I guess one absence wouldn't hurt anyway. I wasn't in the mood for Divinations any how..." She said. Harry smirked and stood up, holding his hand out to help her up as well.



"Let's get going then. I know a place we wouldn't be disturbed all day." Harry said, chuckling to himself as he led her out of the Great Hall. Just as they were about to step out into the corridor, Harry felt himself crash into someone entering the Hall, causing that person to fall back and stumble onto the floor.

Harry looked at the figure sprawled on the floor in front of him intently until he finally let out a self-satisfied grin and held out a hand to help that person up.

"Hello, *Hermione*."

Hermione blushed deep red as she refused to look up and meet Harry's taunting sneer, hastily readjusting her robes.

"What's the rush, Herm?" Parvati asked, looking at her curiously as Hermione hastily fumbled with her books, which were all scattered on the floor after she had collided with Harry of all people.

Since she had taken her shower rather later than usual, she had also been late in coming to breakfast. She was just about to enter the Great Hall to catch a quick bite of breakfast when she had collided with Harry and Parvati, just as they were about to leave.

Somehow, the sight of the two of them together sickened her. She couldn't really explain it but she just couldn't handle Parvati all giggly and clinging onto Harry's arm like that...

The minute she had seen the two of them, her stomach had churned at the sight. Harry just seemed, to Hermione, wrong for Parvati and vice versa... She didn't like seeing the two of them together... It was just plain wrong.

"I have to get to class." Hermione mumbled incoherently, tearing her eyes away from the two of them and looking down on the floor, collecting her things.

"I'll help you with that, Granger." Harry said, casually kneeling down beside her and helping her to collect all the things she scattered on the floor.

"Isn't he sweet, Hermione? Ever the gentleman..." Parvati cooed, giggling to herself. Harry barely heard her, locking his emerald green eyes with Hermione's coffee brown ones as he reached out for a book, his hand briefly brushing against hers.

Hermione almost gasped out in surprise when she felt a bolt of electricity strike up from his hand, causing the both of them to stop abruptly and look up, their faces inches apart. They stared at each other for a minute in silence, Hermione's cheek flushing slowly as Harry seemed to examine her features as he stared at her.

For that very moment, the whole world seemed to disappear around them and all Hermione could see were his beautiful green eyes, sparkling with something so unreadable that she didn't dare to figure it out. They continued to stare at each other for another moment, not

bothering to say anything else to each other until they were interrupted by Parvati's shrill voice.

"Harry! Come on, hurry up!" She whined shrilly, stamping her foot on the floor impatiently. Harry blinked for a minute, a dazed look on his handsome features before he shook his head, clearing his thoughts.

The dazed and entranced "little boy" look suddenly disappeared and the Potter smirk reappeared once again, surprising Hermione with his change of expression. "Be more careful next time, Granger." Harry said, handing her the book she had dropped as they both stood up.

Hermione flushed even darker, snatching the book away from his hands and dusting her robes daintily. "Don't worry, Potter. I will. Now if you'll excuse me..." She grumbled, trying to walk past them with her head down to avoid looking at them but Harry stood his ground.

"What'd the rush, Granger? I'd almost think that you weren't happy to see us." He said, raising an eyebrow at her, obviously amused. Hermione glared at him with indignation, Parvati looking back and forth at the fireworks between the two in surprise.

"Oh no, Potter. I'm extremely pleased to see the two of you. If you don't mind, I need to get to my class soon so if you'll get out of my way..." Hermione snapped coldly, her dark eyes flashing.

"Whoa, hold on here. What is *up* with you two?" Parvati asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. Harry leered, sniggering slightly to himself.

"Nothing, Parvati. Granger and I here just share an... *understanding*, don't we Granger?" He asked, looking Hermione right in the eye and giving the brunette a wink.

Hermione met his glare boldly, not showing him her intimidation. "You wish." She mocked. Harry laughed again, shaking his head. "Granger, you amuse me but Parvati and I have to get going. I'll see you around..." He said, nodding at Parvati to walk ahead.

Parvati shot them one last suspicious look before she walked out of the Great Hall, leaving Harry alone with Hermione. Harry held out his wand at Hermione, whispering something under his breath. A white slip of paper sprang out of his wand at her, causing her to jump back in surprise.

Harry gave her a wry smile once again before he walked around her as though she was an inanimate object and followed after Parvati wordlessly. Curious, Hermione bent down and picked up the slip of paper on the floor, reading it silently.

*-Prefects bathroom tonight at Midnight. Sharp- H.P.*

Hermione frowned, pondering for a brief moment if she should meet him tonight. She had a bad feeling that Harry was up to something but a part of her couldn't resist meeting up with him. Then she mentally slapped herself, shaking her head furiously.

*No! Harry is Parvati's boyfriend now! No matter now much he flirts with you, you cannot forget that he is taken by one of your friends!* Her conscience screamed at her. Hermione fused her eyebrows in thought.

*But then again, Harry Potter belongs to no one...He's his own man... And it's not as if he was taking Parvati seriously...* She reasoned. Hermione's eyes widened as she just realized what she was doing.

"Bloody hell! What am I thinking about?! I cannot actually be serious about getting involved with Harry like this!!" She scolded herself out loud. She shook her head again, this time more vigorously.

*I'll just go see him tonight to tell him off. That's all I'll do. I'll tell him to leave me alone and that I don't want anything else to do with him. Yeah, that's what I'll do.* She thought, nodding in confirmation.

She was about to walk off when she was suddenly cut off by the bell ringing just a few meters from her. Hermione stopped abruptly, looking down at her watch in alarm.

"Oh no! I'm late!!" She exclaimed, forgetting whatever she was thinking about and taking off for first class.

AJ yawned, lazily stirring her potion later that day as Prof Snape, who was their last professor before the day ended, looked at all of the Gryffindors threateningly.

She let her eyes wander around the room, particularly among the Gryffindors. She wrinkled her nose in disgust when she saw Parvati staring at Harry in absolute admiration, practically drooling on her desk.

She and Harry had walked in late to class that day and AJ had been sickened to see that Parvati's robes were wrinkled and her hair was a disheveled mess. Harry had just found his seat sat down calmly while Parvati had walked shakily but with a happy smile on her face, to sit beside Lavender. Snape had taken ten points from Gryffindor after that, saying that Parvati was late.

AJ smirked, shaking her head. *He hadn't even taken points off Slytherin for Harry being late as well but Parvati was too dazed to notice...*She thought, rolling her eyes.

AJ ran a hand through her hair and casually glanced over at Ron, who was cautiously cutting up his potion ingredients into perfect strips, his eyebrows fused together in concentration. AJ slightly felt herself turning a light shade of pink so she forced her look at him into a sneer to cover it up.

Ron looked up at her and catching her smirk, he scowled and glared back at her, his eyes flashing indignantly. AJ gulped and looked down immediately, suddenly focusing all her attention on her potion.

Ron seemed surprised at her sudden discomfort as he looked back at his own potion, casually glancing once in a while at the Slytherin girl.

Blaise, who was right beside AJ, saw all this and sniggered to himself, elbowing AJ sharply in the ribs.

"Calm yourself down. You're acting like a blushing Hufflepuff." He said, shaking his head. AJ flushed in humiliation, slapping Blaise on the shoulder in annoyance.

"I am *not*! I was just thinking about something, I-"

"Oh yeah, then why are you blushing?" He whispered, not wanting Snape to hear them. If possible, this made the girl blush even darker in response.

"I am *not* blushing!" She snapped out loud angrily.

The room suddenly grew quiet and everyone stared at the two of them just as Snape rounded on them angrily.

"I hate to interrupt your little conversation, Ms. Potter and Mr. Zabini but is this something you would like to share to the whole class?" Snape asked icily, an eyebrow arched in intimidation.

Blaise hid his smirk behind his hand as AJ gulped again and turned wide, innocent eyes to their Professor, giving him a sweet smile. "Nothing at all, Professor. Blaise and I were just asking each other about the potion." AJ said pleasantly, ignoring her twin's mocking sneer at her.

Snape didn't look convinced but he nodded otherwise, his eyebrow still arched up at them. "Very well. Carry on then, Ms. Potter. I do not want you bursting out in my class again, is that understood?" He asked sharply.

"Yes, Professor." She answered, still smiling sheepishly back at their head of house. As soon as Snape had turned around, her smile was replaced by a scowl as she rolled her eyes to herself, turning back to stare at her potion.

Draco, who was smirking the entire time Snape had been telling her off, managed to catch her eye and stick his tongue out at her, causing AJ's eyes to flash and return the rude gesture with a death glare. The blonde just laughed and looked away, his eyes twinkling in humor.

Blaise just laughed to himself again, briefly thinking how he could help his friend out in her situation. He glanced over at Ron again, who was now staring at AJ curiously, his forehead wrinkled in thought.

*I wonder if... Hey, wait... I got it...* Blaise thought with an evil smile as he clasped his hands around a piece of a scarab beetle tightly, taking good aim at his target. The minute Ron had turned around; he hurled it across the room at the back of his head, ducking behind his desk immediately to muffle his laughter.

Ron whipped around immediately; scowling as he searched for his attacker from the direction the scarab beetle had come from. His eyes fell on AJ, who was busy trying to make sure her potion was the right thickness to notice him. His face burned with anger and he furiously hurled the piece of ingredient back in retaliation at her.



"Leave me alone, Potter!" He yelled just as the scarab beetle landed in AJ's cauldron with a loud splash, causing the cauldron to explode immediately, spraying the Slytherins with lime green potion.

Pansy and Lila both screamed in disgust as they were showered with the green liquid, jumping up abruptly from their seats. Harry and Draco, who were both in front of AJ and Blaise at that time, has gotten most of the potion and were scowling in anger as they stood, soaked entirely in lime green liquid. AJ stood up, soaked in green liquid herself, and gave the two of them an innocent look, which they returned with an accusing glare.

"It wasn't *me*! Someone threw another piece of ingredient at my potion! It would never have exploded, I was doing everything *perfectly*!" She said angrily in mild indignation.

Prof Snape loomed over her in absolute anger, his eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "Ms. Potter! Are you responsible for this?!" He barked loudly, making even Harry and Draco cringe in surprise.

AJ's eyes widened nervously. "N-no, Prof! I swear, I had no idea-"

"It was *Weasley*, Prof! He threw something at AJ's potion which made the whole thing explode." Blaise defended her, shooting a smirk at Ron.

Ron stood up and glared at them, his chin raised in defiance. "That was after AJ here threw something at me! She was the one who started it, anyway!" He countered.

AJ looked at him as though he was crazy.

"I don't know what you're talking about! I didn't throw anything at you, Weasley!" She yelled back with wide, innocent eyes.

"Yeah right! That explains why-"

"Shut up, both of you right now!" Prof. Snape yelled, running a furious hand through his jet-black hair in annoyance.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, looking at them sternly with a grim look on his face. "Weasley. *Fifty* points from Gryffindor for acting like an immature brat. You and Ms. Potter here will serve detention with me, tomorrow." He said, shaking with suppressed anger.

"Oh, but Prof. Snape, I don't think AJ here had anything to do with what happened. Maybe-"

"Do not bother to stand up for Ms. Potter, Draco. She needs to learn her lesson about acting more like a proper Slytherin should. One detention should be enough to teach her." Prof. Snape interrupted, holding up a hand to stop Draco.

But Draco, not wanting AJ to spend detention alone with Ron, stepped forward again, this time with a determined look on his face. "But Prof! She had nothing to do with the accident! I believe all us Slytherins would agree to that." He persisted, directing a glare at Ron.

"Relax, Draco. I think AJ does need to be taught a lesson." Harry said angrily, pointing to his normally silky black, raven hair.

All the Slytherins turned to look at him, finally hearing the loud laughter coming from the Gryffindor side of the room.

Harry's hair now had a bright pink stripe right down the middle, the absurd color combination making him look incredibly ridiculous as it contrasted sharply with his image. Draco couldn't help it, he started laughing out loud, pointing at his best friend's hair. Harry narrowed his eyes dangerously at him, sneering when he eyed Draco's hair, which had the same stripe as his own except his was bright neon orange.

"Nice hair, Potter! Malfoy! Is that a new fad you're both trying to break in?" Seamus yelled out, laughing hysterically.

Harry turned to glare at him sharply, his anger flaring up even more when he saw that even Hermione was hiding a smile behind her hand. Parvati seemed to be the only one who wasn't laughing but was giving him a sympathetic pout, which pissed him off even more.

Ron smirked and crossed his arms over his chest smugly as Harry and Draco both turned to glare at him. Even Snape looked like he was amused, biting back a smile as he spoke.

"Everyone who has been splashed by the potion, line up here in front and I shall remove it's side effects immediately. Weasley and Potter, you will both meet me here tomorrow. The rest of you can go." He said, taking out his wand as the Slytherins all lined up in front of him.

"All of you follow me now. First years in front." Snape said sternly as he organized the Slytherins into straight, alphabetical lines later that day.

Snape led them all outside the castle, the Slytherins all maintaining a silent, behaved atmosphere as they walked on, not one of them breaking their line. They all kept a straight, blank scowl as they waited patiently in front of the castle with the other houses, which were all fidgeting around uncomfortably in eager anticipation.

Harry, who was behind AJ in line, watched the darkening grounds of Hogwarts silently, a bored, uninterested expression on his face.

After several more minutes, they all heard Dumbledore speak out loudly. "Aha! I believe the delegation from Beauxbatons is approaching at this very moment!" He said cheerfully.

"Where?!" Harry heard Seamus ask out loud excitedly.

"There!" A sixth year answered as they saw what looked like a hundred broomsticks in the deep blue sky, heading towards them.

"It looks like a dragon!" A first year shrieked.

Draco snorted, rolling his eyes in derision.

"No, it's a flying house!" Dennis Creevey guessed, pointing at it wildly.

As the figure flew gracefully across the trees of the Forbidden forest and the lights from the castle windows illuminated it, they were able to make out a powder blue horse carriage the size of a large house soaring towards them. They saw a dozen winged horses pulling it along, each one the size of an elephant. The students in front stepped backward slightly as the carriage came closer, preparing to land in front of them.

A large crash made Neville jump slightly and step on a Slytherin fifth year's foot, making the fifth year snap out and shove him roughly away. A boy in pale blue robes stepped out of the carriage, fumbling with the carriage door until he had set down a set of golden steps. Then, stepping back, the boy made to bow in respect the figure making its way down towards him.

Harry's eyes widened as he saw a shoe as big as a child's sled step out of the carriage, followed by the gigantic woman. Several people gasped in surprise.

The woman stepped into the light, allowing them all to see her large black eyes and her olive-skinned face. She had a rather beaky nose and her hair was pulled into a tight knob at the back of her head. She wore black, satin robes and gleaming opals sparkled from her neck and her fingers.

For once, even Harry and Draco were speechless, their jaws hanging open in shock. Dumbledore started to clap, the students soon following, most of them still looking at the woman in shock.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, dear Madam Maxime." He said, a warm smile on his face.

Madame Maxime returned the smile, extending a glittering hand forward which Dumbledore kissed, barely bending at all.

"Dumbly-dorr, 'ow are you?" She said in a deep, surprisingly low tone of voice.

"I'm in perfect form, thank you." Dumbledore answered, his eyes sparkling with warmth.

"My pupils." Madame Maxime said, waving her hands carelessly behind her.

Harry turned to look at the students behind her, all of them in their late teens wearing robes of fine silk. They were all looking up at Hogwarts with uneasy looks on their faces.

"Is Karkaroff 'ere yet?" Madame Maxine asked.

"Any moment now, actually. Would you like to wait here and greet him or warm up inside?" Dumbledore offered.

"Warm up, I think. But ze 'orses-"

"Our care of magical creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them. He just has to er...take care of some charges of his at the moment." Dumbledore explained.

*Skrewts*...Harry thought, smirking.

Madame Maxine looked apprehensive but nodded and looked over to her students. "Come." She said imperiously, leading her students through the Hogwarts crowd to get up the castle.

Harry moved slightly to give way as a slender girl with silvery-blond hair and deep blue eyes walked past him, slightly checking him out from head to toe. Harry smirked to himself and gave the girl a charming smile, holding out a hand. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

Hermione watched him silently from among the Gryffindors, a scowl forming once again on her face but Harry didn't notice. The girl looked slightly surprised at his direct approach but recovered quickly, flashing him a smile, which showed her perfectly even, white teeth.

"It is a pleazure to be 'ere, I am sure." She answered, slipping her delicate hand in his.

Harry smiled and bent down to give the girl a kiss on the hand, looking up and locking his eyes with hers, unknowingly making Hermione tense up from where she was standing.

*Does he have to flirt with every pretty girl, he meets?!* She thought angrily to herself.

The girl had widened hers slightly when she caught sight of the lightning-shaped scar on her forehead. "Yes, I'm Harry Potter. And you are?" He asked almost reflexively, raising an eyebrow. The girl shut her gaping jaw immediately and laughed slightly at herself.

"I am Fleur. Fleur Delacour. I am sorry, I wuzz just a beet surprised at seeing you 'arry." She said, shaking her head at herself.

Harry laughed too and ran a hand through his raven hair, exposing his scar again. "Please, don't judge me because of this scar, Fleur. It's not something I'm really proud of." He said.



Fleur nodded, her eyes slightly confused and surprised at the same time. "Is there something, wrong?" Harry asked. Fleur shook her head, giving him another smile in reassurance.

"It is just that... Well... I am 'alf veela and I am not used to guys approaching me so casually before wizout zem staring at me like an eediot. You are ze first to approach me like zat." She said, her eyes wide.

"Well, then, Ms. Delacour. I believe you have met your match." Harry said, winking at her. Fleur raised an eyebrow but looked pleased, a smile on her lips. Before she could respond however, Parvati had snaked her arms around Harry possessively and had flashed Fleur a challenging glare.

Fleur looked amused at the gesture, giving the girl a warm, polite smile. "'ello, are you-" "I'm Harry's *girlfriend*." Parvati said sharply, tightening her arms around Harry again.

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance and gave Fleur one more smile. "I'll see you around, Fleur. Hope you enjoy your stay here in Hogwarts." He said.

"I believe I will, 'arry..." She answered, nodding before she walked off inside the castle. Harry was just about to snap at Parvati when they all heard a sound coming from the lake.

Curious, they watched as a dark form arose from the rippling surface of the lake. A large black pole suddenly began to rise out of the lake as the water around it began to spin around like a whirlpool.

Slowly, a huge ship arose from the center of the whirlpool, gleaming in the moonlight. The ship moved towards the bank and they all heard a plank being lowered onto the bank for the people to disembark.

As the people began to walk off the ship, Harry saw that all of them seemed to be along the same physique as Crabbe and Goyle but as they drew nearer, he saw that it was only because of the heavy fur cloaks they all wore.

The man in front of them was heading towards Dumbledore, a smile on his face that didn't seem to reach his eyes.

"Dumbledore! How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?" He greeted.

"Blooming, thank you Prof. Karkaroff." Dumbledore replied easily, smiling. When Karkaroff reached him, he shook hands with him with both of his own, looking up at the castle, a strange smile on his face.

"Dear Hogwarts... How good to be here... Viktor, come along into the warmth. I hope you don't mind, Dumbledore, Viktor here has a slight cold." He said, beckoning a tall boy forward.

Harry watched as the boy stepped into the light, allowing him to see a familiar face under his cloak.

"Harry, it's *Viktor Krum*!" Parvati squealed, nearly jumping up and down in excitement.

Harry yanked his arm away from her and narrowed his eyes at the boy, seizing him up and down. "I can't believe it, *Viktor Krum* is only in school?" AJ, who was beside Draco, marveled breathlessly, looking at the boy in awe.

Draco rolled his eyes at the impressed tone of AJ's voice, scowling darkly to himself in annoyance. "Big deal, it's not as though he's something we should get worked up about." He mumbled.

"Aw...You don't have to be jealous, Drakie-poo... You know you're still the cutest ferret I've ever seen..." AJ teased, reaching over to pinch Draco's cheek playfully. Draco slapped her hand away and gave her a growl, his silver eyes darkening at the memory.

Harry, hearing this, rolled his eyes and ignored them, turning around to head back to the castle. Just as he was about to enter, he caught sight of Hermione who was staring at Viktor Krum in slight awe as Ron and Seamus jabbered on excitedly next to her, pointing to Krum as they spoke.

Harry felt himself grow immensely tense with anger as his hands slowly clutched themselves into tight, angry fists. Draco saw this and sniggered, nudging him lightly to get his attention.

"Ooh... *Competition*.... This will definitely prove to be interesting." He whispered, smirking.

"Shut the *fuck* up." Harry hissed back, narrowing his eyes into dangerous slits as he walked back into the castle for the welcoming feast.

"I think Krum is going to make quite a stir here in Hogwarts." Draco pointed out, nodding towards the Slytherin table where the Durmstrang students had seated themselves, looking in awe at their surroundings and the plates.

"He had better recognize his damn place here, then..." Harry muttered darkly to himself as he headed for their table, Parvati still clinging onto his arm excitedly.

**A/N:** Aw... That's it for now I guess. Not much action in this chapter huh? **PLEASE REVIEW! MWAH! Luvyah!**

## Chapter 11- A Bittersweet Longing

"That's right, Malfoy, go on ahead and muster up to him..." Ron grumbled under his breath as he watched Draco Malfoy engage Viktor Krum in a conversation across the room at the Slytherin table where the Durmstrang students had settled themselves in.

As though the blonde Slytherin had heard his silent comment, he looked up and locked eyes with Ron, flashing him a taunting smirk. Ron growled to himself and angrily stabbed the piece of meat on his plate with his fork, his ears turning red with fury.

"What's wrong with you, mate?" Seamus asked him, looking over at his friend in confusion. Ron growled again and clenched his hands into tight fists. "Just look at Malfoy! He's sucking up to Krum as though he's the biggest hotshot in the world!" He ranted, pounding his fist on the table in frustration.

Seamus and Hermione both rolled their eyes at each other and shook their heads, continuing to eat their food as Ron continued to glare at Malfoy, muttering unintelligible words under his breath.

"Try the *Bouillabaisse*, it's pretty good." Hermione suggested to Seamus, both of them ignoring Ron as she took a sip from her goblet of pumpkin juice.

"Bouilla-*what*?" Seamus asked, scratching his head as he eyed the large dish of shellfish stew that stood beside the large steak-and-kidney pudding. "*Bouillabaisse*." Hermione corrected, helping herself to another serving and ignoring the looks her two best friends gave her.

"Bless you." Ron said absently, still scowling over at where Potter and Malfoy were muttering to each other about him in return, smirking at him every now and then.

Hermione rolled her eyes again and was about to reprimand him when they were interrupted by a drawling female voice. "Pardon, are you wanting ze *Bouillabaisse*?" A tall, slender silver-haired girl, who had come up their table, asked them, causing Ron and Seamus' jaw to drop in awe and admiration.

"No, you can have it." Hermione answered curtly, not even bothering to look up at the girl in front of her. She wasn't stupid. She knew very well that the girl in front of her was the same girl that Harry had flirted with earlier outside the castle. Obviously, she hadn't gotten a good impression of the girl since then.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?" She asked again, holding the plate in her hand.

"Yeah, go on take it." Seamus answered breathlessly, giving the girl a lovesick smile in response. The girl seemed to smirk slightly but smiled their thanks and headed back to the Ravenclaw table, sitting down next to her Beauxbatons friends.

Ron, who had fallen into a deep trance state of staring at the girl, snapped his jaw back shut and shook his head to clear his thoughts. "She's a Veela!" He exclaimed, his eyes wide with disbelief and shock as he watched her.

"Of course not! I don't see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!" Seamus argued, shaking his head dumbly at the idea.

*I somehow doubt that...* Hermione thought darkly as she saw Harry's eyes travel to the Veela-girl's long, slender legs slightly, his eyes glinting maliciously. *What a stuck-up, perverted jerk...* She thought, grumpily munching on her food in silence, cursing to herself.

*I don't even know why I'm going to meet him at all later... He probably isn't worth my time anyway... And besides, Prefects Bathroom?! Who knows what might happen in there?!* Hermione thought, falling into a deep trance.

She turned to look at Harry momentarily and saw him directing one of his frightening glares at Viktor Krum, who was now engaged in a conversation with AJ, both of them laughing apparently at something AJ had said.

Hermione watched as Harry began muttering to himself, leaning over to whisper something to Draco which made the two of them laugh to themselves, smirking in agreement.

Hermione couldn't help but smile to herself in satisfaction. *I wonder why Harry's suddenly feeling all uncomfortable in front of Viktor...* She thought wryly. She didn't get to finish her own train of thought when Dumbledore suddenly stood up in front of all of them with a big smile on his face. Everyone immediately stopped what they were doing and turned to face him with curious glances.

"The time has finally come for the start of the TriWizard tournament. Before we bring in the casket, I'd just like to say—"

"The what?" Seamus asked Ron, who shrugged in response, his eyebrow wrinkled in concentration.

"Just to inform all of you, the judges of this year's TriWizard tournament will be none other than *Mr. Bartemius Crouch*; head of the department of international magical cooperation, *Mr. Ludo Bagman*; head of the department of magical games and sports, *Prof. Karkaroff*, *Madame Maxime* and of course, *myself*." Dumbledore told them, causing the Hall to break out into murmuring again.

Dumbledore smiled at them, turning over to Argus Filch. "Well then, the casket if you please, Mr. Filch." He said, nodding. Mr. Filch, who had been hiding in the shadows, now stepped forward, allowing the students to see a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels.

"This year, there will be three immensely *challenging* tasks for our champions in the tournament. Not to worry though, all of which have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman so we can guarantee everyone's full protection. They will test the champions' different skills and abilities throughout the different tasks to be done and of course, their ability to cope with danger." Dumbledore continued.

Hermione saw Draco nudge Harry and mutter something to him but Harry pushed him away, shaking his head vigorously.

"As you all already know, three champions will be selected, one from each school. They will be marked after each task has been performed and the champion with the highest marks will win the TriWizard cup. They will be chosen by an impartial selector, the *Goblet of Fire*." Dumbledore said, tapping the chest three times to open it.

He took out large, roughly hewn wooden cup filled to the brim with dancing blue flames. Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the cup on top of it for everyone to see.

“Anyone who wishes to join will have to submit their names on a slip of parchment and drop it in the goblet. You all have twenty four hours to drop your names in before the goblet chooses the champions tomorrow. Until then, the goblet will be placed in the entrance hall for it to be accessible for students wishing to drop their names in. Just to let you know, I will be drawing an age line around the goblet of fire. Nobody under seventeen will be allowed to cross that line.” Dumbledore announced cheerfully.

“An age line?!” A lot of students, particularly the Weasley twins, protested to themselves as Dumbledore sat back down.

“It’s probably for the best anyway. Dumbledore would know, right?” Hermione pointed out as they all stood up and began to walk out of the Great hall.

“Speak for yourself. We’ll find a way to get over that line.” Fred said, grumbling as they walked behind Hermione.

Hermione was going to answer when someone roughly pushed her from behind to move her aside, causing her to stumble slightly into Ron, who steadied her with his strong hands.

“Hermione? Are you okay?” He asked, looking at her in concern. Hermione didn’t have time to answer as she turned to see the Veela-girl earlier walking right ahead of her with the other Beauxbatons students. Clearly, by the haughty, careless look on her face, it seemed she wasn’t planning on apologizing anytime soon.

Hermione felt her face heat up in anger as she dusted her robes off, trying to squelch her anger inside. “I swear, I would have thought that girls from Beauxbatons would have possessed better manners than that but I guess I was wrong. What a stuck-up girl she is...” She said out loud, rolling her eyes.



However, both Ron and Seamus were no longer listening as they looked at the veela-girl walking away, their jaws hanging open. "What a *gorgeous* girl she is..." Seamus said in awe, practically drooling.

Hermione made a tutting noise in irritation and stalked off, rolling her eyes at her friends' insensitivity.

"Hey Hermione! We were only kidding!" She heard Seamus call after her but she didn't bother answering, pushing her way crankily to the common room and collapsing onto the chair in front of the fireplace. Muttering darkly to herself, she checked her watch, her eyes widening in realization.

*Nine fifteen...* She thought dreadfully, slipping the note Harry had given her out of her pocket again. She still had three more hours before she would have to face that jerk once again. Sighing, she headed on up to her room and threw herself on her bed, burying her face in her pillow. For some strange reason, she had a very bad feeling about this.

Right after Dumbledore had made his announcement to everyone, Harry and Draco stood up and headed back to the Slytherin common room, leading a large group of Slytherins behind them who were still pretty much caught up in talking about the TriWizard tournament.

As Harry was about to walk out of the Great Hall, he stopped abruptly when he almost collided with Prof. Karkaroff, who was on his way out. Rolling his eyes to himself, he stepped back and let the man go first, causing the other Slytherins behind him to wait impatiently behind.

"Harry? What are we waiting for?!" Parvati, who was still clinging onto Harry's arm, asked stupidly. Harry ignored her, his eyes focused on the man in front of him as Prof. Karkaroff looked at him in amazement and surprise, the familiar flicking of the eyes on his lightning shaped scar.

He looked around until he caught sight of the girl who looked very much like Harry, a crescent moon-shaped scar on her forehead. Both teenagers were giving the professor very annoyed looks.

“Yeah, those are the Potter twins, if *that’s* what you’re wondering.” A voice behind them said. They all whirled around to see Moody looking over at them, a sneer directed at Prof. Karkaroff.

“*You!*” Prof. Karkaroff spat out, looking at Moody with disgust and utter loathing in his eyes.

“*Me.* Now unless you have something important on your mind, you might want to move since you are holding up the line.” Moody said grimly, pointing to the line of students behind Harry.

Prof. Karkaroff looked over at Harry one last time before he narrowed his eyes and walked out of the room, ignoring the smirk on the student’s scornful face.

“It was a pleasure meeting you all, I am looking forward to this year.” Viktor Krum said as they passed the Slytherins. Draco, Blaise and AJ gave him a half-smile in return while Harry merely nodded coldly, his eyes emotionless.

As the Durmstrang students walked on, Harry shrugged Parvati’s arm off his, dusting himself and turning away abruptly. “I’ll see you tomorrow then, babe. I have some other business to attend to tonight.” Harry said grimly, flashing a smirk over at Draco and Blaise, who both got his message and hid a smile.

AJ looked between the two of them in confusion, her eyebrows fused suspiciously as the group continued to walk down the empty corridors leading to the Slytherin Common room.

“But Harry...” Parvati whined, linking her arm through his again and snuggling herself into his arms, burying her face into his smooth, pale neck.

Harry stopped walking abruptly and shut his eyes in irritation, cursing under his breath to himself as Parvati’s hands began to entangle themselves in his raven hair seductively.

“I thought that maybe I could sleep in *your* bed tonight... Surely whatever you have to do can’t be more important than me?” She cooed, tightening her arms around him.

*Apparently, she thinks it's turning me on. She thought wrong.* Harry thought darkly. She sighed into him, taking in his sexy, musky-scented aftershave and kissing his neck softly.

*Damn, he even smells sexy...* Parvati thought as she inhaled more of his sexy scent again.

AJ and Blaise both looked at each other in disgust, shaking their heads at the scene before them. Draco just smirked in amusement, obviously trying to hold himself from making a snide comment or from laughing out loud.

Finally, Harry let out a growl and pushed Parvati away roughly, obviously no longer in the mood. Parvati's eyes widened in shock at Harry's sudden coldness. She scowled at him just as he readjusted his robes.

"I said I'm busy tonight. I've got other plans, Parv. You understand, don't you baby?" He said coolly, raking a hand through his hair before turning to give her a disarming, charming smile.

Parvati was still scowling at him, her eyes filling with tears of frustration. *Oh great... Now the bitch is going to try and use the crying method at me... Females and their fucking sensitivity...* Harry thought in annoyance, rolling his eyes as his smile immediately faltered.

"But Harry, I only wanted to spend some time with you... I love you..." She said, hugging him again, sniffing softly. This time, both Draco and Harry rolled their eyes, Draco checking his watch impatiently. "Come on, Potter! We don't have all day!" He snapped irritably.

Harry gritted his teeth in frustration, his tightly clenched fist shaking his anger. *Control yourself... You don't want to blow this girl off yet... You still have use of her as of now... Let her off slowly...* His conscience told him.

Harry slowly counted to ten with his eyes closed before he opened them and slowly pushed Parvati away from him again, placing both his firm hands on her shoulders to keep her in her place.

"I know that, baby but I can't be with you tonight. I have...*stuff* to do, okay? We'll be together tomorrow, alright? I promise, baby..." He said calmly, biting back his impatience. Parvati sniffed and turned around, another scowl darkening on her face.

"I just hope it's not another girl, Harry." She said stubbornly, her back to him. Harry nearly lunged after her in anger but AJ held him back quietly and slapped him on the back of the head to knock him back to his senses.

Draco and Blaise were desperately trying to hide their laughter now but were failing in vain. Harry scowled at his sister but nodded and took another deep breath to calm himself. "Parv. Just go to bed. We'll talk tomorrow okay?" Harry said coldly.

"But, Harry, I—"

"I *mean* it Parv. If you still want to be my *girlfriend*, that is." Harry said, mocking the word "*girlfriend*" but Parvati didn't seem to notice. Now realizing what was at stake, she slowly nodded and walked back to Gryffindor towers, sniffing to herself.

*He cannot dump me...That is too humiliating. I couldn't handle that.* She thought glumly as she walked away. As soon as she was gone, Harry let out a deep breath and shook his head, mumbling to himself.

Draco and Blaise finally let out the laughter they had been holding in and cracked up, practically rolling on the floor. Harry glared at them.

"Shut the fuck up, both of you!" He snapped, grabbing a fistful of Blaise's robes and holding him up from the floor in threat. Blaise just laughed again as Draco finally stopped laughing, smirking next to AJ.

"Gryffindors... Always knew they were pathetic crybabies. That girl is probably the most pathetic girl you have ever hooked up with, Potter." Draco said, shaking his head as Harry set Blaise back down.

Harry snorted in agreement, rolling his eyes and walking on. "Yeah, Harry's got that poor little girl wrapped around his finger. She's acting like a blind, lovesick puppy." Blaise agreed, out of breath from laughing.

“So when’s judgment day, Potter? When are you dumping this chick?” Draco asked casually.

Harry sneered, laughing. “I don’t know yet, exactly. It’s not everyday I find a stupid girl who’s obedient and a good lay at the same time. Probably around one week more I guess. It all depends on my mood anyway.” He said.

“You guys are all sick. I can’t believe you would treat a girl like that. Even if she *is* in Gryffindor.” AJ said in disgust, shaking her head in dismay.

“Aw come on, we’re not *always* like that. There *are* some girls out there who are worth caring about...Even though most of them can be hard-headed, stubborn little brats...” Draco said, looking at her expectantly.

Blaise snorted derisively out loud while Harry smirked to himself. “Yeah, Draco you *would* say that.” Blaise teased, a knowing smile on his face.

Draco suddenly flushed slightly and looked away from AJ, walking on in silence. AJ just raised an eyebrow in confusion before she shrugged and followed after the three boys, sighing to herself.

“By the way, Harry... I was just curious... Would you by any chance be interested in that TriWizard tournament back there?” Draco asked suddenly, hastily changing the topic.

Harry’s eyes widened, caught off guard and he spun around to face his best friend in surprise. “Are you crazy, Malfoy? The tournament is *strictly seventeen years old and above*. Plus, it’s an absolute waste of time. I don’t need to win any prize anyway.” Harry retorted scornfully, shaking his head.

“Yeah but still, think of the honor that would bring you, Harry. That would bring *Slytherin*, for that matter.” Draco protested as they rounded the corner.

“Draco, didn't you hear what Dumbledore said?! It's for *students who are seventeen years old and above!* I'm three years too young!” Harry pointed out in annoyance.

Draco snorted, carelessly waving the fact aside. “Since when did *we*, or rather, since when did *you* care about abiding by any rules anyway?” He countered smugly.

“I am telling you, Draco! My answer is *no!* I am *not* going to sign up for that damn TriWizard tournament! Hell, I. Am. *Underage!*” Harry snapped impatiently as he, Draco and the rest of the Slytherins headed down to the Dungeons.

“Why not? Come on Harry, think about it! Hogwarts' champion would come from Slytherin house! That is something really honorable for us Slytherins because we are the damn best there is among these other losers. And if *you* sign up, Potter, you're a sure win.” Draco pointed out as Harry gave the password to their common room, allowing them to enter.

“Forget it, Malfoy. I get enough of that danger crap already. I do *not* want to get involved in this damn competition. Hell, they can pick Weasley for all I care but not me.” Harry mumbled, sitting in one of the high armchairs in front of the fireplace.

Blaise, who had just walked in with AJ, butted in, sitting in the chair right next to Harry's. “Draco's right you know, Potter. You're like the *pride of Slytherin* anyway! You could be the *Slytherin champion!* It would definitely remind the other students, which is really the best house around here!” Blaise agreed.

Harry clenched his hands into fists as Draco chuckled in agreement and plopped down on his opposite side.

“Now, guys, really. I don't think Harry should join this. Like he said, he's way behind the age limit anyway and I'm sure it would be better if you guys persuaded our own Slytherin seventh years to join the competition instead.” AJ reasoned carefully, plopping down on her brother's lap.

“They wouldn’t stand a chance of being chosen. You know how those bastards are anyway. And besides, if *Viktor Krum* is going to get chosen, which I’m sure he will, you being the Hogwarts champion is the best way there is for you to upstage the loser.” Draco said, causing Harry to ponder on the moment slightly.

Then, he shook his head again, shooting Draco a menacing glare. “I said, *no*, Draco. And that’s my final decision. I don’t have to prove anything to those Durmstrang idiots anyway.” Harry said, cracking his knuckles as he stared deep into the burning green fire in front of him.

Draco sighed and shrugged, shaking his head. “It was only a suggestion anyway, Harry. Just try to think about it for a while. I’m sure we can find a way to sneak your name into that goblet even if there’s an age line involved. It’s a once in a lifetime chance.” Draco said, sneering.

“I just hope Moody doesn’t catch us in that act. You wouldn’t want to turn into a ferret again, wouldn’t you Draco?” AJ teased, causing Harry and Blaise to laugh in amusement.

Draco burned bright red and mumbled something under his breath, looking like he wanted the floor to swallow him up. “Stupid idiot...” He mumbled, glaring at the floor.

AJ seemed to notice his embarrassment and laughed to herself, getting down Harry’s lap and sitting over next to the blonde Slytherin. “Aw, I was just kidding Drac. You just looked so cute as an animal, I couldn’t resist.” AJ said, playfully messing up Draco’s perfect hair and pinching his cheek childishly.

“Hey! Watch the hair will you, Potter?! Just because *your* hair is a total mess, doesn’t mean *my* hair should be!” He taunted, slapping her hands away from him and annoyance.

AJ just smirked and gave him a grin, shaking her head as he began fussing with his hair again. “I swear, I *hate* Moody. He’s just a bloody, fucked-up idiot who thinks he can get away with anything just because he used to be an Auror. When I tell my father about him...” His voice trailed off darkly as he stared off into space.

Harry silently had to agree about Moody. He didn't really understand it but there was just something about the old professor that made Harry slightly suspicious. He just couldn't tell what it was.

Sighing to himself, he checked his watch. *Nine fifteen...* He thought, lazily looking around the elegant Slytherin Common room. *Still got plenty of time before my little swim with Granger.* He thought, chuckling to himself.

He seriously hoped tonight would be the night that Granger would give in to him. He didn't know how much more he could handle if he didn't. Because frankly, to be honest, Granger has been proving herself to be a lot stronger than he expected. It was a very frustrating experience for him. He didn't normally have to wait this long just to reel a girl in. He was going to crack if he had to wait any more.

*Though...* Harry glanced over at his best friend, who was watching him in amusement and shaking his head. Harry just glared back at him, mirroring the sneer on his face.

*Draco doesn't have to know that anyway.* He thought, laughing silently to himself. Draco narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously. "What's with the look, Potter? I know you well enough to be aware that you're planning something I'm not going to like at all..." He said, raising an eyebrow.

Harry changed his evil sneer into an innocent smile. "What makes you think that, Draco?" He asked sweetly, trying to prevent a sneer from breaking out.

"Potter, after being your best friend for 3 years now, I know you inside—out. Now what do you want?" Draco demanded. Harry laughed and shook his head, grinning.

"Fine, then, Draco. I've just been meaning to ask, what's up with you? Why aren't you hooking up with any chicks this year? Haven't you got anyone in mind that you're interested in?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.



Draco unknowingly let his silver eyes wander over to where AJ sat but Harry was onto him. “*Except*, that one. Still forbidden territory, Malfoy.” Harry said sharply, giving him a pointed look.

Draco glared at him in frustration but sighed and shrugged, sinking down in his seat. “I don’t really give a fuck, Potter. Unlike you, I am *not* that interested in playing around with those girls anymore. They’re just a waste of time.” He said, rolling his eyes.

Harry gave him a challenging look. “Yeah right. Why don’t you just admit that you’re not as charming as *I* am, when it comes to the ladies?” Harry taunted.

Draco’s eyes flashed as AJ and Blaise laughed in amusement. “Hell, no way Potter! I can take on any girl, any day. I’m just not interested in anyone *else* right now. There are better things I can do with my time besides sleeping with girls. Which reminds me, when are we heading down to the library to read up on dark—?”

Harry gave him a sharp look to shut him up before he managed to say out “Dark Arts” out loud. Draco snapped his jaw shut immediately, casting a nervous look at AJ and Blaise.

“Read up on what?” Blaise pressed, looking at the two of the curiously.

“Read up on dark defense spells that Moody gave us to research on last time. He says we have to submit it to him by next week.” Harry lied, giving Draco a silencing look.

“Oh. Well, anyway, good night you guys. I’m going to bed, don’t want to stay too late up tonight. I still have detention with Snape tomorrow morning...” AJ said, yawning as she slowly stood up, stretching delicately.

“Good night then, sis. Come here; give your big brother a good night kiss.” Harry said, beckoning her over to him. AJ smirked at his unbecoming line but nodded and came over, giving him an affectionate kiss on the cheek, hugging him slightly.

"Night." She said, releasing him and walking over to Draco, whose eyes widened at the thought of her hugging him goodnight. AJ smirked at his eager face and moved away from him, causing the blonde to glare at her in irritation.

"Night too, Drac. *Sweet dreams.*" She said sarcastically, finally giving in and giving him a peck on the cheek. Draco glared at her and made to wipe at his cheek but couldn't help the blush on his features.

Grinning, she hugged Blaise last, giving her best friend a quick kiss on the cheek. "Night Blaisee-poo!" She mocked, running away as Blaise tried to ruffle her hair in response. She laughed and waved off to them, heading for the girls' dorms. When she was gone, Blaise stood up as well, heading over to the boys' dorms. "I'm turning in too. Night you guys, don't stay up too late." He said, nodding at them.

Harry and Draco both smirked and waved him off, both Slytherins staring at the emerald-green flames in front of them in silence as the students walking in and out of the common room eyed them fearfully, knowing the Slytherin duo was up to nothing but trouble.

After a long moment of dark, tense and creepy silence, Draco spoke up, looking at Harry intently. "Dare I ask, Harry, exactly what or rather, *who* is your *other important business to attend to?*" Draco asked knowingly, his eyebrow quirked up.

Harry couldn't help laughing in amusement at Draco's accusation, breaking the silence of the room. "Am I really *that* predictable, Draco?" He asked, still sniggering.

Draco gave him a weak lopsided smile. "You think?" He asked sarcastically. Harry laughed again shaking his head. "Fine. If you must know, Draco, I kind of asked Granger to meet me tonight. Might as well get it over and done with, right?" He said smugly.

Draco made a derisive snort, rolling his eyes. "Sounds to me you're a lot more excited about this than you *should* be, Potter. It seems to me that you're moving in a rather *slow* pace with this girl."

Harry's eyes flashed briefly for a minute. "Hey! That's only because I'm taking my time with her. I have all the time in the world anyway. I'll reel her in when I feel like it." He said defensively.

Draco merely raised a single eyebrow. "*Riiigghhtt*... Pretty confident, are we...? Hmm... Yeah, okay. Whatever you say, Harry." He drawled.

Harry was about to snap something back when Draco stood up, yawning slightly. "Well, I'm turning in for the night. Good luck, Potter." He said, smirking before he nodded and headed off towards their dorms, his robes swishing behind him.

"Fuck you, Malfoy." Harry snapped to his retreating back in irritation, eyes narrowed darkly. Draco didn't turn around, merely raising a hand high enough for Harry to see the middle finger proudly raised as he walked away. Harry watched his retreating back disappear into the boys' dorms, scowling darkly in annoyance.

*I won't need luck.*

**THUD!**

"Ouch, darn it!" Hermione hissed under her breath as she accidentally stubbed her toe against a statue in front of the Prefects bathroom.

*I can't believe I'm even here... I should never have agreed to meet up with Potter, in the first place...* She thought darkly to herself, shivering in the cold silence of the dark, deserted corridor.

She looked at the statue behind her, reading the name right next to it in curiosity. "*Boris the Bewildered...*" She read out loud, fingering the writing on the statue.

*Well... At least he understands how I feel right now... Maybe they should put up a statue of me right next to him after tonight named "Hermione the Hopeless"* She thought, wrinkling her nose at her own bad pun.

Sighing, she leaned against the statue and waited in tense silence, looking around occasionally for a sign of Filch's annoying cat. *I don't*

*even know why I bothered coming here! Is this something a future head girl would do?! I should be focused on my subjects! Not stupid, Slytherin jerks!* She thought bitterly to herself.

After several more minutes of impatient fidgeting and silent whining, Hermione breathed out a sigh of frustration and checked her watch.

*It's almost twelve thirty...I'm not standing around here waiting like a fool any longer.* She thought in irritation, heading off back to Gryffindor Dorms when she felt two strong arms circle around her waist and pull her backwards, causing her to fall into a strong, pine-scented embrace.

Annoyed, she was about to tell the stranger off when she suddenly widened her eyes, seeing nothing behind her but air. Freaked out, she opened her mouth to scream in terror but it ended up as a weak choking sound when she saw Harry's handsome face emerge out of thin air.

Then, laughing, he took off his cloak, allowing Hermione to see the rest of his firm, lean physique. Before he could say anything, Hermione flushed dark red and shoved him away angrily, causing him to walk back a few steps.

"That was *not* funny at all, Potter! You scared me half to death! I don't know about you, but scaring a girl in the middle of the night when she's all alone is not something a *man*, as you say you Slytherins are, would do!" She hissed angrily, pounding her fists on his firm chest.

Harry caught her fists with his hands and held them tightly, smirking at her anger. "For your information, *Granger*, I was not trying to scare you. I just snuck out of my dorms with my invisibility cloak. How the hell was I supposed to know that it would scare you out of your wits? You're supposed to have that Gryffindor courage and all that crap." He said, obviously amused by her behavior.

"I swear, Potter! You are just the most insensitive jerk I have ever met! I don't even know why I bothered to come here! You can go jump off a cliff for all I care, I'm out of here!" Hermione snapped, turning on her heel and trying to walk off but Harry grabbed her hand

and spun her around to face him, wrapping his other arm around her waist.

“Aw, come on, Granger. Don’t be like that. Just hear me out.” Harry mocked pleaded, his lips quirked into a taunting grin. Hermione twisted herself out of his arms, dusting her robes as though he had dirtied her somehow.

“I don’t think so, Potter. I’m sure your *girlfriend* wouldn’t be too happy knowing that you’re chasing after other girls behind her back.” Hermione spat out.

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” Harry answered back simply, shrugging carelessly. Hermione’s eyes widened in both disbelief and disgust.

“Potter, you are absolutely the most *disgusting*, most *sexist* jerk in all of England! You don’t care about anyone but yourself!” She accused.

Harry shrugged again, chuckling at the girl in amusement. “Sure I do, Granger. I came, didn’t I? Shouldn’t the fact that I’m asking you out like this be enough for you to know that I am indeed, *interested* in you? Is it everyday a girl can say she was asked out by the hottest guy in school?” He pointed out arrogantly.

“Try the *foulest*, and *most disgusting*, Potter. Does your girlfriend know about this?” Hermione asked coldly.

“Nah... I don’t have to tell the girl everything anyway. Besides, it would be better if she didn’t know. That way, she won’t get hurt. See? I do care about other people’s feelings.” Harry said with a mocking smile.

Hermione made a sound somewhat between a growl and a sigh of frustration, shaking her head. “Someone who is in a steady relationship should *not* be asking other girls out anyway, Potter. Did anyone ever tell you that?” Hermione snapped at him, narrowing her eyes accusingly.

“Sorry Granger, but I guess I was absent when they taught that in moral values class.”

*“Potter!!”*

Harry just leaned back against the statue, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched her with a sneer on his face.

“That’s it! I’ve had enough! I never want to talk to you again; it’s useless talking to somebody with a small brain!” She snapped, turning around again but this time, she found herself unable to move her feet frozen on the floor.

Frustrated, she saw Harry walk over to her slowly, smugly twirling his wand around his fingers. “It pays to read up on different dark hexes and curses in advance. Though, it’s something I wouldn’t want anyone else to know...” Harry said smoothly, gently stroking Hermione’s smooth cheek.

“Yeah? Then why did you tell me, Potter? Aren’t you afraid that I’ll tell the whole school that you’re a dark wizard?!” Hermione taunted.

Harry chuckled, shaking his finger at her as he flashed her a smug, confident smile. “You *won’t*... I’m not exactly a dark wizard, Granger...” He corrected, tucking a strand of Hermione’s hair behind her ear.

*Not yet anyway...* Harry thought but he didn’t want to say that out loud to Hermione. “And besides, I’m quite confident that you’re not going to tell anyone about that, aren’t you Granger?” Harry said, winking at her.

Hermione flushed red. “You Slytherins are all the same anyway...Like telling anyone would really matter...” She muttered under her breath.

Harry pondered on this for a moment, mocking a thoughtful look at her. “I guess you could say that... But... That’s not why I called you here for anyway, Granger.” He said, snapping his fingers.

Immediately, Hermione felt her feet capable of movement again as she took a step back from him, her back pressing into a wall.

*I can't believe he can perform wandless magic...* She thought in awe but she shook her head to clear the thought away. Somehow, in the situation that she was in, she didn't want to think about that right now.

"I thought you might like that night-swim now, Granger. You look like you could use some time to relax anyway." Harry said coolly, raising an eyebrow at Hermione's sudden discomfort.

*Swimming? That would mean wearing a bathing suit in front of Harry... A bathing suit meaning exposing more skin to Harry Potter... Plus, seeing Harry's chest is something I don't think I can handle right now...* She thought in fear.

Harry smirked as though he could hear her thoughts and stepped forward, offering a hand to her. "Scared, Granger? After all, it's just a little swim. Unless of course, you're scared of me... Don't worry... I won't *bite* ..." He added seductively in a low, sexy tone of voice that sent shivers down the Gryffindor's spine.

Then, to himself, he let out a secret smile, knowing Hermione would take him up on that challenge. Hermione's eyes seemed to flash after that comment, her gaze on him hardening as she lifted her chin up defiantly.

"Me? Hell, no Potter! I'm not afraid of Slytherin scum like you!" She retorted, raising an eyebrow at him.

Harry smirked teasingly and offered a hand again, his smirk growing wider when Hermione immediately took it boldly, throwing him a challenging look as she did. "Likewise, Ms. Granger." Harry replied with his charming smile, lifting the hand she offered him to his lips and kissing it gently.

Hermione desperately tried to prevent the blood from rushing up to her cheeks as she coughed hastily and looked away from him. No way was she going to let him see her eyes. *What's the matter with me? I thought I came up here to tell him off? How did I suddenly agree to go swimming with him? Me and my damn pride! You did it again, Hermione!* Hermione's head screamed at herself but she ignored it, angry at herself for being too easy to lead on.

*But wait... Where exactly—??* She thought as Harry led her down once again to the dungeons, his hand caressing hers in the darkness. “Potter, I thought we were going swimming...?” She asked incredulously, raising a single eyebrow at the Slytherin.

Harry looked back at her, a smug smile on his face. “We are.” He answered simply, not offering any more information. Hermione scrunched her eyebrows in confusion. “But then, *why—*”

But Harry put a finger to her lips, amused by the girl’s confusion. “Are you telling me you *want* to swim outside in the cold lake?” He asked. Hermione shook her head, still utterly confused. Harry laughed and led her down a narrow corridor.

“So...What lame excuse did you tell your little Gryffindor friends about tonight? Do they know you’re here?” Harry asked as he continued to lead them down more corridors, obviously in Slytherin territory since Hermione didn’t know where the hell they were going.

“What they don’t know won’t hurt them.” Hermione answered, imitating Harry’s tone earlier with a wry smile.

Harry stopped abruptly for a moment and turned to look at the Gryffindor girl in surprise, a disbelieving look in his face. Hermione just raised an eyebrow in response, a smug look on her face.

Harry laughed out loud, shaking his head. “Bloody hell! You know, you’d make one heck of a Slytherin, Granger. That’s probably why I’m so intrigued by you.” He said, smirking.

Hermione’s confidence faltered slightly before she rolled her eyes and yanked her hand away from him, looking around. “Where exactly are we Potter?” She snapped.

Harry leered at her and walked over to the wall behind her, pointing to a wall drawing of a Slytherin serpent underwater. Muttering something under his breath, he pressed his hand against the Serpent, causing it to glow a bright green.

Hermione watched in awe as the Slytherin serpent seemed to move on the wall and face Harry, hissing something in parseltongue.



*“Open in the name of Salazar Slytherin...”* Harry hissed back in the same language, earning him a confused and frightened look from Hermione.

*Damn...I forgot Potter is a parselmouth... I wonder what he said to it...* Hermione thought in shock. *Kind of creepy we have another Slytherin parselmouth at Hogwarts...* She thought, shuddering as she remembered what happened in their second year about the Chamber of Secrets.

However, she didn't have much time to ponder on that thought since she was too busy watching the serpent on the wall move around until it began twirling around in a tight circle, slowly forming small hole in the wall which seemed to grow bigger and bigger until it was big enough for the two of them to enter.

Harry then turned to Hermione with a smile on his face as the girl stared back at him in shock, her jaw hanging open. “Let's get going then, shall we?” He asked, offering another hand to her. Hermione took it wordlessly, still gaping.

Inside, they saw a gigantic sized elegant swimming pool in the shape of a big “S” at the very center of the room, with high diving boards on either side on the pool. It's crystal, clear water allowed Hermione to see the marble flooring underneath.

The room smelled of sweet incense and a large, magically floating chandelier adorned with sparkling emeralds hung above the very middle of the pool, dimly illuminating the room with the light being reflected by the emeralds. The area was elegantly decorated with lush armchairs while a warm, white mist swirled around the room, giving it its warm, romantic atmosphere. Some of the walls were gleaming mirrors, which allowed Hermione to see herself gaping like an idiot.

Harry noticed her expression of awe and chuckled, plopping down one of the armchairs, casually folding his arms behind his head. “Nice huh? Draco and I found it last year while we were exploring the castle. Apparently, only a true Slytherin and parselmouth can open it. It's incredibly useful though since he, AJ and I spent a lot of our time

here last year. You're the first girl I brought to see it, though." He said, smirking.

Hermione glared at him irritably. "I'm *honored*." She said sarcastically. "But aren't you forgetting something? I haven't got a bathing suit to wear." Harry grinned slyly, gesturing to the room across from her.

"There's a dressing room in there. Try to see if you can find anything that will fit you." He said in a tone of voice too innocent to be trustworthy.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously for a moment, narrowing her eyes before she sighed and walked off, Harry watching her retreating back. "Time to get working, Potter..." Harry said to himself, starting to unbutton his robes to change into his swimwear.

*I'm guessing Salazar's favorite color was green...* Hermione thought wryly as she walked out of the dressing room wearing a green swimsuit, a white towel wrapped around her waist.

"Isn't there anything related to Slytherin that isn't green?" Hermione asked as she walked back into the room where Harry was.

Her words soon died out as Harry slowly turned around from where he was changing next to the pool, his eyebrow raised. Hermione's jaw dropped open, her cheeks immediately flushing with color as she realized that she should have asked if it was safe to walk back into the room for Harry had apparently not finished...*changing*...just yet.

Hermione couldn't do anything but gape at him and stare in shock as Harry calmly raked a hand through his hair, acting like nothing was wrong about him standing in front of a girl not wearing anything at all.

Slowly, he smirked at her embarrassed and uncomfortable shock, casually scratching his head. "Granger, would you mind turning around so I put on my swimming trunks?" He asked calmly, still smirking.

Hermione nodded hastily, squelching the squeak that almost escaped her. "I—I'm sorry. I'm sorry, excuse me." She said, turning around

immediately. *Oh my god...That was so embarrassing...*She thought to herself, shaking her head, still blushing furiously.

She didn't dare turn around again until she heard a distinct splash, which indicated that Harry had finished changing and was now in the pool. Sighing in relief, she took off her towel and walked over to the edge of the pool, where she slowly got in, enjoying the warmth of the water.

"You know, I've always wondered... What exactly was it about the *great* and *powerful* Harry Potter that drove all the girls in school wild and crazy... You have to ask why there would be so many gullible women nowadays." She said wryly, splashing some water on herself.

Harry stared at her from where he was immersed in the water, his eyes penetrating right through her form.

"Is that really how you think of me, *Hermione*? I'm not always the horrible, self-centered jerk that everyone believes me to be all the time... I would have thought that someone like you would have understood that... Wasn't it you yourself who said you saw a different side to me?" He said, almost gently, burying his head briefly underwater before he stood back up, raking a hand through his now glistening dark hair.

Hermione tried not to stare at him too much, realizing how gorgeous he looked at the moment drenched and soaked in clear water, and raised a haughty eyebrow at him in disbelief. "Well everyone makes mistakes, I guess." She answered wryly, shaking her head.

Harry flashed a self-satisfied smile, moving forward in the water towards her and circling her around like a shark would to its poor, unsuspecting prey. "Does that mean, you're willing to give me a chance? You're willing to forget about all those things that happened before in the past between us?" He whispered seductively, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind her.

Hermione immediately freed herself from his arms and moved away from him, walking backwards in the water nervously.

"No, Potter. I *meant*, I was wrong about seeing a different side to you. You Slytherins are all the same. I'll admit right now that for the first time in my life, I was *completely* wrong about a person because obviously, you're still the same jerk you were three years ago." She said coldly, narrowing her eyes at him.

*Hey, I'm actually pulling this off...Keep it up, Hermione...* Hermione told herself, amazed at how strong and how confident her own voice sounded. Harry looked as though he was pissed off for a moment, his jaw clenching and his eyes flashing dangerously but he shook his head, walking toward her again.

"Look... I know I've done a lot of fucked-up things before in the past and I'm sorry for all that. I guess I *have* been a jerk but I'm willing to forget about all of that now. I truly am interested in you. You have something that I don't see in other girls..." He drawled, stroking her cheek.

Hermione backed away from the Slytherin, not knowing if it was because she was disgusted or she felt her knees go weak at his touch. "Yeah right... That sounds like something right out of your disgusting handbook of overused pick-up lines, Potter. I'm not about to be led on like the others. I actually use my brain. Besides, why would popular, powerful, pretty-boy Potter, take such a personal interest in someone like me?" She asked, strong sarcasm dripping from her voice.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but she wasn't finished yet, not giving him a chance to answer her question. "Why don't you go and flirt with more girls like your girlfriend or Pansy Parkinson? I'm not your type Potter, and you're *definitely* not mine." Hermione said.

Harry, who had been watching her intently with his intense emerald eyes, allowed his trademark sneer to overcome his face again. "Oh, I see now, Granger. You're *jealous*. I understand why. You don't have to pretend with me." He said, a smug grin on his face.

Hermione glared at him. "You wish, Potter! Read my lips, I am *not* interested in you. I'd rather be eaten alive by a giant squid than to ever be with such an insensitive, self-centered and *brainless* creep like you!" She snapped at him.

Harry's sneer seemed to disappear as he looked down dejectedly, shaking his head sadly. "I... I'm really sorry, Hermione... I guess I should have known better than to think someone like you could ever like someone like me..." He said solemnly.

*What is he going on about now?* She thought, taking a tentative step back again as Harry's eyes dropped down miserably, his gaze looking as though he wanted the pool to swallow him up alive in humiliation.

"I'm....I'm really sorry, then..."

Hermione couldn't help but feel a little guilty for putting him off like that as he seemed to back away one more step, eyes still looking downcast. Hermione's eyes narrowed in suspicion again, not sure if she was about to let herself trust his act.

"I should have known that I wouldn't have a hell's chance with someone like you..." He said sadly, shaking his head. Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What did you just say? Why would you think that?" She asked.

Harry turned to look at her, eyes wide and glistening. "Because... You're...You're *perfect*. You're the exact opposite of me... You're sweet... You're smart...You're beautiful... Innocent and fragile... I don't deserve you at all." He said softly.

Hermione was silent for a moment, her jaw open in shock and surprise, taking in what he just said. *Does he really feel that way?* She thought as she reluctantly walked towards him in the water. Before she knew what she was doing, she had wrapped her arms around him in a tight, comforting hug.

"I...I'm sorry... I guess I... *Harry*...I didn't mean to assume things. I just—" Hermione didn't finish her sentence as Harry put a finger to her lips, silencing her.

Slowly, he let that finger trace the outline of Hermione's lips gently, his intense eyes examining every inch of her face. "You really are beautiful, you know..." Harry whispered as he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Hermione's eyes widened when she felt a sudden jolt from his hand stinging her face. Harry's eyes had widened in surprise too but he ignored it, still focusing on studying her features.

Then, without warning, Harry caught her lips with his again, causing the both of them to unleash their hidden desire for each other once more the moment their lips made contact. Almost instantly, Hermione's eyes fluttered shut in both surprise and passion and her arms tightened themselves around Harry's neck.

Hermione sighed with bliss as she entangled her fingers through his damp hair, casually twirling a lock of it with her fingers. Harry wrapped his strong arms around her waist and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss and unknowingly causing the both of them to weaken in effect.

Hermione felt herself get dizzy as she kissed him back with the same passion and desire, letting all her emotions for him momentarily escape through their kiss. He was so close to her that she could smell the sexy scent of his aftershave, the delightful fragrance just perfect to drive her crazy with want and desire.

She was only brought out of her reverie when she felt Harry's hand snake up to her back, heading for the zipper of her swimsuit which startled her enough to crash back to her senses. Her eyes popped open immediately, face burning with shock.

*The jerk! He hadn't meant what he said at all! He was only after this all along! He was only trying to reel me in by another kind of act of his! And I was stupid enough to fall for it!!* She thought in mild indignation, yanking herself away from him immediately in disgust.

She shoved him away from her, her face burning with anger. Harry's gentle attitude altered immediately as he turned his blazing eyes towards her, the smirk melting into a dangerous scowl. "Granger, what the *fuck* is your problem?!" He demanded impatiently, an enraged snarl on his face.

*Yup, the real Harry Potter is back now.* Hermione thought bitterly. She pushed past him, ignoring the death glares he was giving her

behind her back. "I swear, Granger, you are a downright, indecisive bitch!" Harry snapped at her in obvious frustration.

Hermione whipped around, causing a few drops of water to splash him slightly but he barely even noticed.

"I may be but you will never stop being an *insensitive, uncaring* and *obnoxious* jerk! And if being a bitch means being able to see through your pathetic acts of romance to play me for a fool, then so be it! For that, I'll leave you to yourself now." Hermione said coldly, stepping out of the pool and once again wrapping the towel around her waist.

"I didn't even get to you at all, Granger?! First you lead me on then you turn ice cold and shove me away the next second! What the *fuck* do you want?!" Harry asked angrily, narrowing his eyes at her from where he still stood in the shoulder-high water, his Potter sneer back in place.

"Definitely *not* you."

Harry felt his anger blaze up instantly at the pride-insulting words, causing him to curse out loud and give the Gryffindor his meanest glare. "Interesting... Well... I'm glad we finally have something in common then don't we, Granger? After all, why would I want *you* when I can have other...*more beautiful* girls out there worthy of me?" He retorted, laughing harshly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, biting back the tears of hurt and disappointment that threatened to fall down her eyes. I won't let you get to me, Potter. I'll *never* let you get to me like that again. Frankly, I don't understand why you think so highly of yourself. I don't want you." She taunted, imitating his words earlier.

"Like *that* matters to me, Granger. At least I know that there are people who *do* want me. Can you say the same for yourself, Gryffindor mudblood?" He finally lashed out, the cruel stinging words causing Hermione's heart to clench in pain.

Silently, she willed herself not to cry as she turned around slowly to face the smugly sneering Slytherin boy once more, hardening her

brown eyes so that they didn't dare show the intense hurt she was feeling inside at his words.

"That's just *crap*, Potter. Get some new material. And more importantly, find another girl to bother." Hermione said, making it sound as though the conversation was over.

Yanking a shirt over her swimsuit, she finally grabbed her school robes and tore out of the room before Harry could notice the bucket of tears carefully forming in her crushed brown eyes.

Harry stood exactly where he was, keeping his smirk firmly in place as he heard Hermione exit the room and leave him in total silence. "Sweet dreams, duchess!" He yelled out sarcastically, his hands clenched into fists of frustration again.

He didn't hear a reply anymore as he was left in the silence of the poolroom, muttering darkly to himself. When he was sure she was gone, he got out of the pool and violently slammed his fist against the wall, surprisingly causing the whole room to shake because of his strength.

"Agh, *damn!!* I was so *fucking* close!!" He cursed out loud again in anger, a dark, horrifying snarl on his face.

"Damn you Granger for being so damn strong! What more do I have to do to get through your thick, bushy-haired head?!" He yelled out furiously again, his furious voice echoing in the dead silent chamber. Finally exhausted, he collapsed on one of the arm chairs in front of the fireplace, willing himself to calm down.

Scowling, he looked into the fireplace, his eyes glinting maliciously and dangerously with undeniable malevolence at the realization that he, *Harry Potter*, had just been harshly rejected by his worst enemy.

"Damn you Granger!" He violently slammed his hand against the mantle of the fireplace, the pain barely registering as his fist smashed against the hard marble.

"Damn you for doing this to me!" He yelled again, this time grabbing one of the vases within his reach and hurling the expensive object



into the blazing fire. He growled, watching in fury as the bright flames seemed to give him a spiteful smirk in response.

Then, he sighed and finally buried his head into his hands in silent frustration, wanting nothing more than to drown out the world around him and to erase what had just happened.

Slowly, he opened his emerald eyes again and stared darkly into the blazing flames for the last time, making out the perfect reflection of himself in the smoldering luster.

With a small, slowly forming smirk on his lips, he allowed one last whisper to echo silently in the empty chamber...

"Damn you for making me want you this badly..."

"You're late, Ms. Potter." Snape said disapprovingly as AJ burst through the Potions classroom the next morning. She gave the older Slytherin a weak smile as she struggled to catch her breath and make the most of her tangled web of dark hair. Ron smirked at her state from where he already sat in one of the chairs, arranging the potion ingredients into their respective vials.

"I'm sorry, Prof. You see, I overslept and by the time I woke up, I only had ten minutes to take a shower and rush down here. I'm really sorry." AJ said hastily, panting as she ran a hand through her uncombed raven hair. Wincing in embarrassment, she began adjusting her hastily-put-on robes, her cheeks darkening uncomfortably.

Snape couldn't help smiling in amusement as he noticed her slightly unfocused eyes. The girl was obviously not meant to wake up too early in the morning. "Indeed I see that, Ms. Potter. It seems you haven't gotten much time to dress up as well." Snape commented.

"How could you tell, Professor?" She asked sleepily, yawning out loud.

"Because from what I see, you haven't even managed to wear your clothes, properly." He said, amused as he pointed to the unbuttoned buttons on her robe just below her neck.

Eyes widening in utter horror, she laughed to cover it up and hastily began buttoning them, coughing lightly with a darker tinge of red on her pale cheeks. "Er, yeah, uhm... So anyway, Prof, uh... What am I supposed to do?" She asked, looking around.

"Well, Ms. Potter, you and Mr. Weasley here are to arrange all my potion vials in proper alphabetical order, of course, making sure that each one contains the proper ingredients in accordance to the label. I am giving you this until breakfast starts, which is exactly after around 2 hours." Snape said.

*Great...* AJ thought miserably to herself but she flashed Snape a sweet smile, nodding. "Sure Professor. We'll get it done, piece of cake." She said, grinning sweetly. Snape seemed to look pleased at her obedience and enthusiasm before he nodded and left the room in silence.

AJ's sweet smile immediately disappeared as she turned to sneer at Ron, who easily obliged back with his own glare, narrowing his eyes at her. "You know, as much as I'd like to glare at you all day, Potter, I would actually think that we could finish this faster if you actually risked a broken fingernail to help out." Ron said snidely.

AJ smirked and sat down on the opposite table away from him. "Why, Weasley, I didn't know you enjoyed staring at me that much but unfortunately, I can't say the same thing in return." She drawled, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, you are such a pampered little brat, Potter. I'll bet you never even have to lift a single nail at all because those jerks in Slytherin you hang around with treat you like you're a helpless little princess..." Ron muttered in disgust, rolling his eyes.

AJ felt her face heat up as she tightened her fist around the glass vial in her hand, wishing desperately she could hurl it at the boy across from her. "I am *not*, Weasley! Now shut up and get back to work so I don't have to stay here too long. You're not exactly someone I'd want to be with the first thing in the morning." AJ said wryly, smirking at him.

*Yeah right, I feel like I have sign that says "Liar" right on my forehead...* She thought stupidly but she scowled and shook the thought away. Ron snarled at her, his ears turning red in anger. "You better watch your mouth, Potter! I won't hold out on you just because you're a bloody girl." He threatened.

AJ smirked at his frustration, secretly admiring the way his ears turned a dark shade of red when he got angry. Chuckling to herself, she began readjusting her robes again, buttoning the buttons in the right places since she seemed to have missed them as she was rushing earlier.

Ron blushed as he watched her, coughing and looking away abruptly. "Um, Potter? What do you think you're doing??" He asked, burning even darker.

AJ looked up, the sly, smug smile on her face as she saw his obvious discomfort. "What the hell does it look like, Weasley? I'm re-buttoning my robe. You heard what Snape said anyway, it would be embarrassing for me to look as though I can't even wear my clothes properly." She said simply, shrugging.

"I know that, Potter. It's just that, could you have maybe *not* done that in front of me?" He asked, still blushing.

AJ laughed seductively, raising an eyebrow at him in surprise. "Does that mean you want to help me with it?" She asked, a teasing, flirtatious gleam in her eye.

Ron's eyes widened in surprise, his face showing both his shock and his embarrassment. AJ had to laugh again at his adorably innocent and blushing expression, shaking her head in silent mirth. "Weasley, I swear, you are too innocent for your own good. *Gryffindors...*" She said, rolling her eyes but laughing to herself.

Ron muttered something under his breath which sounded suspiciously like, "Stupid, Slytherins..." but AJ ignored him, getting back to fixing the vials on the rack. The Gryffindor sighed but obliged by doing the same, wanting nothing more than to pretend that the annoying Slytherin was no longer in the room with him.

The two worked in tense silence for a couple of agitating minutes, Ron growing more and more irritated by the second until AJ finally managed to accidentally break one single vial, the annoying sound finally causing the redhead to break.

“This is all your fault, Potter. If you hadn’t thrown that stupid thing at me during Potions, this never would have happened anyway.’ Ron said bitterly, scowling at the girl across from him.

AJ merely raised an eyebrow, narrowing her eyes at him as she struggled with the broken shards in her hands. “Excuse me? I didn’t do anything. *You* were the one who acted like a goddamn child making my potion explode like that! Definitely a bloody Gryffindor...” She said in disgust.

“Oh don’t start that Gryffindor crap again, Potter. Would you spare me for *once*? I don’t want to listen to this over and over again. We Gryffindors are ten times the wizards you evil Slytherins will *ever* be, I’m *damn* proud to be one.” Ron snapped indignantly.

AJ stood up from her seat and placed the vials back on the shelves, ignoring Ron completely as the said Gryffindor glared at her from where he sat in growing resentment. Sighing, she sat back down and continued to work in silence, not daring to look at Ron in the eye.

*He’ll always seem to hate me, won’t he...? It’s hopeless...I’ll never get the chance to really know him if we keep this up...*AJ thought sadly, shaking her head.

Neither of them spoke to each other for next hour as only the occasional clinking of the glass vials could be heard in the room. AJ let out another sigh and didn’t dare look up again, not wanting to start another fight in the process.

Ron, however, looked up at her, briefly admiring the way her raven hair shined silver in the light. *Gorgeous...Beautiful...Plain beautiful...*He thought for a moment, a secret smile forming on his face.

AJ froze in surprise and instantly looked up from the vials she was holding, causing another one to slip through her hand and crash to

the floor. Ron gulped and met her disbelieving eyes nervously. "What did you just say?" She asked, her eyes wide and uncertain.

Ron gulped and looked down, looking at anything else besides her. He hadn't realized he had said the word out loud. "Nothing. Nothing at all." He said, shaking his head furiously.

AJ stared at him in astonishment. *Beautiful? He...I... Well... This actually might have a chance after all...* She thought incredulously, smirking to herself.

Ron hastily stood up and brought the rack he was arranging onto the shelf, angry at himself for being so careless. *I do NOT like AJ Potter. No way. Ew, yuck, NO.* Ron thought stubbornly to himself as he headed back to his seat.

He whirled around and found himself face to face with AJ, her eyes still wide with surprise and sparkling slightly with mischief, causing the normally emerald green orbs to glow brightly.

"I... I just dropped something..." She said, indicating the broken vial on the floor. Without thinking, Ron bent down to pick up the pieces, slowly, rising back up while keeping his eyes trained on her face.

She gave him a lopsided smile as she took the broken glass shards from him, smirking in amusement again when Ron flushed red the moment their hands made contact. "Something bothering you, Weasley?" She asked, raising an eyebrow at him seductively with an irresistible twinge of innocence in her voice.

Ron paled to a shaky ashen, raking a shaky hand through his disheveled red hair. "Nothing Potter. Anyway, we better get back to work." He said, clearing his throat and sitting back down.

"Must we really?" AJ asked, casually sitting down on the table in front of him, giving him a good view of her long, slender legs. Ron's eyes widened like saucers as they fell on the smooth limbs in front of him while his bottom lip made its way between his teeth.

“I mean, if you’d take a look around you, you’d realize that we’ve actually finished everything we’re supposed to do.” She drawled on, clearly enjoying Ron’s uncomfortable fidgeting.

“Oh yeah... Well, then I-uh...”

“Are you always this *articulate*?” AJ teased sarcastically, arching a delicate eyebrow at him.

*Is she flirting with me? Why don’t I feel absolutely disgusted then.....??* Ron asked himself in dismay, his eyes wide with shock. He blushed darker, if possible and hastily readjusted his robe collar.

“Well, I uh, I’m—”

“Well then, Mr. Weasley, Ms. Potter! How is everything here?” Snape interrupted, walking back into the room.

AJ sniggered derisively to herself before she immediately jumped off the table. Then, smiling brightly, she began dusting her robes as if nothing had happened. “We just finished, Professor. Is there anything else we have to do?” She asked, throwing a smile over at Ron, who was still gaping like an idiot at her.

Prof. Snape looked around the room, nodding his approval before he nodded at AJ as well, giving her a pleased smile. “Very good Ms. Potter. Very good indeed. You may join your friends at breakfast now. I believe Dumbledore wishes to announce the champions today... I do hope it is a Slytherin. As for you, *Weasley*, ten points from Gryffindor for breaking one of my vials.” Snape said, scowling as he snatched the broken shards away from Ron.

Despite herself, AJ let out an amused giggle as she saw Ron’s shocked look instantly transform into a deadly glare at her. *Well...At least the look is kind of endearing in a way...Even though it looks as if he wants to break my neck...* She thought, her eyes dancing in laughter.

“Hey! Professor! I didn’t—” Ron turned to glare at AJ in accusation again but the girl had already walked off, her black robes swishing dramatically behind her.

“Something on your mind, Weasley?” Snape asked sharply, narrowing his eyes at Ron.

Ron gulped, shaking his head and grumbling to himself. “Nothing, Professor. I’ll just be heading on back to the feast now.” He muttered darkly, walking out the door with a sour look on his face.

“Morning, *sunshine*.” Blaise greeted sarcastically as AJ collapsed, out of breath, on the seat next to his in the Slytherin table where all the other Slytherins were, eating their breakfast.

AJ just gave him a death glare in warning before sitting down on the seat next to him and instantly allowing a bright, glowing smile. “Where were you this morning, AJ?” Draco asked her, his eyebrows fused together in question.

Blaise hid a smile as AJ blushed slightly, coughing to hide her discomfort. “I was just, uh, I had to finish that damn detention with Weasley. No big deal.” She mumbled hastily in reply.

She poked Blaise in the ribs, leaning over to whisper something to him in secret. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Just please, shut up right now.” She hissed at him. Blaise raised an eyebrow but nodded, his gray eyes burning in keen interest.

Draco’s face instantly formed itself into a hideous snarl, his eyes darkening maliciously and his form tensing. “You were with Weasley? Could you honestly get any lower, Potter? Don’t you have any class at all, woman?” He sneered darkly at her, his hands slowly tightening into fists.

Surprisingly enough, AJ didn’t seem to notice his sudden anger, shrugging carelessly in response with the bright smile still lingering on her delicate features. “Like I said, it was nothing important. I could handle the git, anyway. He wasn’t really much of a bother.” She reasoned lightly but Draco wasn’t listening anymore.

He had focused on glaring at Ron, who had just walked into the Great Hall and was making his way over to the Gryffindor table looking dazed and bewildered. Ron didn’t notice him, still scratching his head in confusion as he talked to Seamus.

Blaise, however, seemed to notice Draco's sudden change of attitude. "Relax, Malfoy. You're being a tad bit too obvious, at the moment." He pointed out, smirking as he saw the murderous gleam in the other Slytherin's eyes.

"Obvious about what?" AJ asked, looking between the two of them. Blaise was about to answer when Draco raised his wand, causing Blaise's mouth to seal shut before he could utter a word.

Furious, Blaise glared at Draco, narrowing his eyes as Draco smirked, shaking his head at AJ. "Nothing, AJ. Don't listen to this idiot here. He's just ranting on again about useless information... *As usual.*" Draco said, throwing a cold, threatening glare at Blaise.

Blaise tried to snap out something in response but it only came out as a muffled "Mmph!", causing him to narrow his eyes at Draco in anger.

"Not a word, Zabini." Draco threatened dangerously, leering before he raised his wand again, lifting the spell from Blaise.

Blaise jerked away, glaring at Draco in anger. "Fuck you, Malfoy! I wasn't going to say anything anyway!" He countered, scowling.

Draco just gave him a self-satisfied smile, shaking his head. "Better safe than sorry. It's hard to trust someone with a mouth as big as yours, Zabini." He remarked sarcastically.

"Stupid, self-centered jerk..." AJ muttered under her breath, finally losing her bright smile and giving Draco her meanest glare. Draco just cocked an eyebrow at her, looking highly amused and at the same time, causing AJ's blood to boil at the smugness in his eyes.

Draco gave her a mocking wink before he turned back to sneering and glaring at Ron across the room, no longer paying them any more attention.

AJ finally noticed her twin brother, who was sitting right beside Draco, his head buried in his hands as he slept on the table. She shook her head at him in disbelief, gently shaking him awake. "Somebody didn't get enough sleep last night." She said derisively, rolling her eyes at him.



Harry jerked away, muttering darkly to himself before he buried his head in his hands again, shutting his eyes tight. "Sod off, AJ! I'm not in the mood! Didn't get enough bloody sleep last night!" Harry grumbled, yawning sleepily.

"Yeah, I happen to know that this guy came in at around four in the morning. What were you doing, Harry? Don't tell me you're cheating on your girlfriend, already? Where is the girl anyway?" Draco asked snidely, looking up to see Parvati at the Gryffindor table with her friends, giggling and shooting coy glances at him and Harry.

Harry's head snapped back up as he glared at Draco sharply, silently willing him to shut up as AJ narrowed her eyes at her brother. "Who were you with this time, Harry?" She demanded suspiciously.

Harry just gave her a sly smile. "No one, AJ. I just took a swim in the Slytherin pool room, no big deal. I wasn't with anyone." He said innocently.

AJ didn't look convinced as she saw Hermione Granger walk into the room, yawning and looking in the same sleepy state as Harry was. She felt a twinge of suspicion as she looked back and forth between her brother and Hermione, noticing the strange, malicious glare from her twin.

*My brother and...The mudblood?? Could it be?* She thought, her eyes narrowing into angry slits. Then, after a moment, she shook her head vigorously, laughing at herself for thinking such a thing.

*Nah...That's impossible! Harry would never be interested in a mudblood or such a conservative girl, for that matter! She's not his type at all.* She thought, smirking. But her suspicion came back when Hermione briefly met Harry's eye for a moment, glaring at him before she sat down beside her friends in the Gryffindor table.

*Or if she?* AJ asked her brother silently, raising an eyebrow haughtily at him. Harry noticed this and gave her his famous sneer, snidely sticking out his tongue at her simply to piss her off.

AJ scowled and snapped her head away, rolling her eyes at his insensitivity.

Draco was just about to make a comment on how stupid they were behaving when Dumbledore suddenly called their attention, the Goblet of Fire in front of the Great Hall for everyone to see.

Everyone looked at him expectantly, their eyes twinkling with anticipation and excitement. "Well, I reckon the Goblet of Fire has almost made its decision. The best thing for us to do is to wait for it to give out the names." Dumbledore said cheerfully, waving his wand to extinguish all the candles in the room, plunging the whole room into darkness.

Everyone watched in silence, most of them with their eyes on their watches, squirming around impatiently. The flames in the goblet suddenly turned a deep red and a second after, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a piece of parchment fluttering out of it.

The room gasped as Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and read it out loud to the whole Hall in a clear voice. "The champion for Durmstrang," Dumbledore looked around the room again with a smile, "will be *Viktor Krum*."

"No surprises there!" Ron yelled out, the whole hall bursting out into applause as Viktor Krum rose up from the Slytherin table, following Dumbledore as he led him to another chamber, shutting the door behind them.

"I saw that one coming." AJ said, still clapping along with the other students.

"Big deal. The guy can barely walk right." Harry mumbled, his scowl darkening enviously. He and Draco had been the only ones in the Slytherin table who had not even lifted a hand to clap when Krum's name had been called.

Moments later, Dumbledore walked back out and headed for the Goblet of Fire again just as it shot out another piece of parchment, which Dumbledore easily caught and read out loud again.

"The champions for Beauxbatons will be... *Fleur Delacour*!" He read out before the hall burst out into applause again. This time, Harry

clapped right along as Fleur stood gracefully from the Ravenclaw table, her silver-blond hair shimmering in the light.

“Looks like they’re disappointed.” Blaise whispered sarcastically to AJ, gesturing to the other Beauxbatons students who looked as though their grandmother had been both heavily mutilated and killed by a raging Hippogriff.

AJ smirked but turned to look just as Fleur passed Harry, who gave her a wink, flashing his charming smile. *You would think he would spare the girls who are older than him...* AJ thought bitterly. But then again, she forgot that this was *Harry* she was talking about...

Just as Krum did, Fleur walked into the next chamber and everyone soon waited for the next parchment to come in tense impatience.

The Goblet of Fire turned red once more, shooting out the last piece of parchment. Dumbledore caught it again, reading the name out loud to the Hall with a pleased smile on his face. “The Hogwarts Champion,” He called out loudly. “is *Cedric Diggory!*”

Draco and Harry both smirked as the Hufflepuff table burst out into deafening cheers, screaming, stamping and jumping on their feet excitedly as Cedric stood up with a grin on his face, heading for the chamber with Dumbledore.

“Congratulations Cedric.” AJ greeted him warmly as the new Hufflepuff champion walked by her table.

Cedric smiled back at her. “Thanks, Amanda.” He said, grinning before he walked up to join Dumbledore, who was smiling at him warmly.

Blaise rolled his eyes in annoyance and sneered at his best friend mockingly. “Thanks Amanda!” He said in a high voice, imitating Cedric.

AJ raised an eyebrow at him and silently flashed him her middle finger in response. Blaise just laughed and stuck his tongue out at her, causing her to growl again, rolling her eyes before she snapped her head away.

Draco nudged Harry. "See? If you had put your name in, you would have given *Slytherin* house much more honor. Thanks to you, our champion is now a *Hufflepuff*!" Draco said in disgust, shaking his head.

"Draco, for the last *fucking* time, I *cannot* be the champion! I. am. *Underage!*" Harry hissed out loud but Draco was no longer paying attention as the Goblet of Fire seemed to shoot out another tongue of fire into the air.

Almost reflexively, Dumbledore extended a hand and caught it again, holding the parchment for a long time while reading it over and over again with a shocked look on his face.

There was a stunned, uneasy silence in the whole room as everyone watched him with wide, anxious eyes. Then after what seemed like an eternity, Dumbledore cleared his throat, turning his eyes up to meet the shocked faces in the room.

*"Harry James Potter."*

**A/N:** ....Mwahaha! Another cliffhanger! I am really evil! ) Hope you enjoyed the *really long* H/Hr scene here! **PLEASE REVIEW!!** I'll die if you all don't!! Hehe! Hope you guys liked the chapter! If you didn't, sorry! **DON'T FORGET TO REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 12- The Pride of Slytherin

After hearing this, the whole Great Hall sat in tense silence and shock as eyes turned from every direction towards the raven-haired Slytherin, whose eyes had widened in dismay as well and was returning their stares with a blank, dark look.

Unlike the other champions, no one had applauded but instead, silence had been pulled over the room like a curtain and the only sound they had all heard was the sound of a silver spoon being dropped onto the cold floor.

Harry's wide eyes slowly narrowed as he scanned the faces of everyone in the hall, looking at him with unreadable expressions. *What the fuck are they staring at?* He thought angrily, giving all of them a threatening, malicious glare, making them all shift uncomfortably and turn away.

He saw Prof. Snape stand up and whisper something to Dumbledore, who listened carefully, nodding his head with a frown on his face. Moody was looking at Harry with both his eyes, an unreadable expression in them that Harry didn't really want to know.

Most of the Gryffindors at the Gryffindor table was gaping at Harry in incredulity, not daring to believe that a Slytherin could be chosen as the Hogwarts champion. Ron's eyes were wide with surprise and a spark of envy was visible in them. Beside him, Seamus and Lavender were whispering to each other and eyeing Harry up and down in suspicion.

Even Parvati seemed to have been shut up as she turned her wide eyes to Harry, obviously expecting him to look back at her and explain himself. Harry barely paid them any attention at all as he looked straight at Hermione, whose jaw was hanging open, staring openly at him.

Harry felt a surge of irritation and fury at her believing that he would actually join so he shook his head slowly at her, a dark scowl on his face but she continued to gape at him. He turned to look at his twin, who looked at him with the same surprise and disbelief as everyone was in the room.

"I didn't put my name in that goblet, AJ." Harry said slowly, seeing the anger in her eyes. AJ didn't respond as she narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion, her features forming itself into a furious snarl.

"*I'll bet...* Harry." She just retorted sarcastically, glaring at him. Harry's eyes flashed as he glared at his twin angrily.

Frustrated, he scanned over his own table and was surprised to see the look that was on most of his housemates' faces. Most of them were actually giving him an approving smirk, impressed that he would dare attempt to put his name in the Goblet of Fire and defy Dumbledore.

The others, like Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle, were just stupidly staring, their eyes looking dazed and unfocused. The only one who seemed to manage not to throw Harry a stunned look was Draco who was currently giving Harry a self-satisfied smirk; an approving, impressed yet slightly jealous look in his eyes.

"Well, well Potter. I'm glad it seems you took my advice after all. I knew you had it in you. At last, we have a real *champion* to represent Hogwarts. Slytherin is proud of you, Harry." Draco drawled supportively as he made sure everyone in the hall had heard his words.

He clapped Harry lightly on the shoulder. Harry just gave him his blank stare as Draco gave him a lopsided grin. Smirking calmly, Draco started clapping out loud in recognition, the loud steady sound instantly filling up the silence of the Great Hall.

Harry slowly quirked his lips into a grimace and managed to mask his shock by flashing Draco a grateful grin, faking his confidence and his amusement as one by one, all the Slytherins in their table started following after Draco in applauding their new champion.

Pretty soon, the entire Slytherin table, except AJ, was cheering and catcalling out loud, all of them crowding around Harry and clapping him on the back to show him their support.

The rest of the Great Hall stared at the group in silence as they continued to cheer loudly, their loud applause heard around the entire

room. The Hufflepuffs all scowled at them as the Slytherins all started chanting Harry's name out loud, smirking at the other tables as they did.

"Kick some ass, Potter!" Blaise quipped, flashing him a thumbs-up sign. "Potter, you're the man!" A Slytherin first-year exclaimed in admiration.

Harry forced another confident smile onto his face, feeling incredibly irritated at their being happy about him being chosen for something he didn't even want to join in the first place. *I can't believe they actually want me to be in this thing.* Harry thought in anger.

"Harry, we're all so proud of you!!" Pansy squealed, jumping onto him excitedly. "Pansy, get the bloody hell off me!" Harry snapped, shoving her away roughly.

"Yeah, Parkinson. Don't you dare bloody touch him..." Parvati said smugly, walking up to them from her table and throwing her arms around Harry.

The Gryffindor table all tensed up in anger and rage, at the bold action but Parvati didn't seem to care, too intent on smothering Harry's face with sloppy kisses. "I'm so proud of you, baby!!" She squealed.

Harry flinched in annoyance and rudely pushed her away, not having the patience to deal with the girl's antics at the moment. "Parv, not now. You're embarrassing me." He snapped curtly, not even bothering to look at her.

Parvati flushed pink in humiliation as Pansy and some other Slytherin girls sniggered at her. "F-fine. Alright, Harry." Parvati mumbled in embarrassment as she walked back to her table, her face still burning.

Harry didn't even hear her as the Slytherins all congratulated him one by one, all of them with identical smirks on their faces. Still with his forced grin, he looked at his twin who glared right back at him resentfully, refusing to take part in congratulating him.

She just crossed her arms over her chest and turned away from him, rolling her eyes. Harry's heart sank painfully, giving her a look of anger and indignation. *It's not as though I wanted this to happen. I don't even know who the fuck put my damn name in that goblet!* He shouted silently at her.

As always, it was as if she had heard his silent words, turning back and just giving him a blank stare in response, before shaking her head and turning away again.

"Mr. Potter, would you please come up here?" Dumbledore asked from the very front of the room after he had watched the scene with a surprised look on his face.

Harry nodded and was about to walk towards the door where the other champions had entered when Draco stopped him abruptly, stepping in front of him.

"Good luck, Harry." He said, grinning as he offered his hand. Despite his mood, Harry grinned as he remembered that this had been their exact same stance three years ago when Draco had first offered his hand to Harry that day on the train.

Lucky for him, he had taken it. What would have happened to him if he had stayed with Ron? Harry shuddered at the thought. *I would have been a GRYFFINDOR right now...* He thought in disgust.

Sighing and offering his best friend a weak chuckle, he clasped Draco's hand and the two of them performed their secret handshake publicly.

Then, nodding at Draco in appreciation, he turned and walked off to Dumbledore, an almost reluctant scowl on his handsome features. *How did I ever get into this?!*

Across the hall, Hermione watched Harry carefully, noticing a definite reluctance and hesitation in the way he sauntered over to Dumbledore. *Is it my imagination or is Harry's walk not exactly as confident as it usually is?* Hermione thought, wrinkling her forehead in confusion.



She watched Dumbledore indicate Harry to walk inside the room where the other champions were and close the door, leaving the hall breaking out into loud murmuring and exclamations.

“Bloody hell! I can’t believe that bloody git actually managed to get past the age line and get picked as a fourth champion! What a delusional jerk. I thought the goblet of fire actually chose *decent* champions to represent the school!” Ron spat out bitterly.

“Harry *is* a decent champion. Did you see the way he dueled last year? And he’s very *powerful*, from what I know. It’s just that—”

“He’s a *Slytherin*, for Merlin’s sake!” Seamus interrupted Ginny, who scowled at having been cut off.

“So?! That doesn’t mean he can’t be a good champion!” She pointed out, pouting slightly. Hermione ignored her, rolling her eyes.

Everyone in school knew of Ginny’s huge crush on Harry every since first year but Harry had never paid her any attention at all except when he taunted her in the corridor. She could still remember the valentine Ginny had written for Harry in their second year which she had hired an elf to sing for him. It was a total disaster which had ended up with Malfoy and AJ laughing hysterically and Harry just smirking in satisfaction and amusement.

“Of course it does! It means that he’s obviously used dark magic to get past the age line. He probably did it last night while everyone was asleep because I heard from a first year Ravenclaw that he was seen heading back to his dorms very early in the morning.” Lavender said as a matter-of-factly.

Hermione snapped her head towards them in protest. *But I was with him last night! That was why he came in late!* “No, he couldn’t have!” She exclaimed out loud, instantly regretting letting the words she let out the moment they had left her lips.

Heads of her friends turned to look at her in suspicion, their eyebrows slightly raised. “What do you mean by that, Hermione? How would you assume that?” Ron asked her, a hint of doubt in his voice.

Hermione's eyes widened when she realized what she had said so she coughed and laughed, shaking her head. "Because obviously, it would take a really magically advanced wizard to counter a spell performed by Dumbledore... I doubt it could have been Har—I mean, *Potter*. The jerk doesn't have anything between his ears to begin with." Hermione lied, forcing a laugh.

Her friends laughed along with her, calming her back down in relief. Ron, however, still didn't look convinced. "Still... *how* could he have gotten past the age line? It's just not possible. Unless he asked someone older in his house to do it for him..." Ron pointed out thoughtfully.

"Yeah, sounds like Potter. He has a lot of friends among those Slytherin jerks in seventh year anyway. He probably asked one of them to put it in the goblet or maybe even Prof. Snape himself. You know how much Snape spoils that stupid git...Potter's his favorite student." Seamus added, shaking his head in shame.

"Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if it really *was* Snape who put Potter's name in the goblet of fire. That slimeball will do anything to uphold the so-called reputation his house anyway." Ron said bitterly, rolling his eyes.

"Still, I don't think Potter put his name in..." Hermione said firmly, shaking her head. "How can you be sure of that, Hermione? You know his reputation anyway!" Ron argued, glaring at her.

"I just *am*, that's all. He didn't look all that happy when his name was called." Hermione pointed out. "Yeah right... Didn't you see his egoistic smirk the minute his housemates started clapping for him?" Seamus countered.

"Before that, Seamus. He was actually frowning and he didn't look all too pleased as he walked to the front of the room." Hermione said thoughtfully.

Ron narrowed his eyes at her. "Since when are you the expert when it came to Potter?" He asked, snorting derisively.

Hermione didn't get the chance to answer as Parvati suddenly cut in, looking extremely annoyed at them. "Will you stop talking about Harry like that? He doesn't deserve to be the object of any of your insecurities or jealousies just because he's ten times better than you are!" She snapped irritably.

Ron glared at her in resentment, his ears turning red in anger. "Why are you defending him anyway? He wasn't all that happy to see you when you went over to give him your support. You're wasting your breath, Parvati." He retorted, causing some of the other Gryffindors to chuckle in agreement.

Parvati flushed red but composed herself quickly. "I...We... He was busy, that's why. And why do I have to explain myself to *you* anyway? This is none of your business." She replied derisively, turning away.

"Stupid idiot..." Ginny whispered to Hermione. Hermione didn't answer her but instead looked at the Slytherin table where he saw AJ frowning and mumbling something to Draco.

Draco just frowned and shook his head at her, obviously trying to explain something to her in comfort. AJ just scowled darker and turned away from him abruptly, suddenly fascinated with the paintings on the wall.

Hermione watched as Draco sighed and shook his head, turning back to talk to his other housemates. *Well AJ doesn't look too happy about something either. I wonder if it has something to do with Harry being a champion...* Hermione thought skeptically.

*But still, I still can't help feeling that Harry couldn't have done it... He was with me last night...* Hermione thought to herself, desperately trying to hide the rush of blood coming to her cheeks. *I wonder who would go through so much trouble to make sure Harry gets in the tournament...* Hermione asked herself, looking at her untouched plate of food in thought.

"Professor, I *didn't* put my name in the goblet!" Harry protested as Dumbledore ushered him inside the chambers where the other champions were waiting.

"I know, Harry but every witch or wizard whom the goblet of fire chooses is required to join the TriWizard tournament." Dumbledore explained calmly, shutting the door behind them.

"But hell, I don't *want* to join the tournament! I want out, this is crazy!" Harry snapped angrily, running a furious hand through his raven hair.

The other champions looked up from where they stood, gazing into a fire at the very center of the room, looking at both Harry and Dumbledore curiously. "What is going on, Professor?" Fleur asked in confusion, looking at Harry.

Harry just gave her a sheepish grin, causing the girl to hide a smile behind her hand in amusement.

Before Dumbledore could answer, they heard Ludo Bagman's overly excited scurrying feet behind them, heading for Harry. "Excellent! Very excellent indeed! Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce, the *fourth* champion!" Bagman exclaimed, clapping Harry on the back.

Viktor Krum immediately stiffened and eyed Harry up and down in challenge, which Harry returned himself with a dark, taunting sneer, showing exactly that though he was younger, he wasn't afraid of the other boy at all.

Cedric looked between both Dumbledore and Harry, a polite, confused look on his handsome features. Fleur just looked impressed and disbelieving at the same time, her deep blue eyes wide and startled.

"Is this some kind of joke, you're all pulling on me?" Harry asked, looking at all of their faces.

"Joke? This is certainly no joke, Mr. Potter! Your name came out of the goblet of fire! You are the first ever *fourth* champion!" Bagman exclaimed, grinning at him.

"But obviously, there must have been a mistake... I'm *under* the age limit, I can't be in the tournament." Harry pointed out irritably, looking at Dumbledore.

“True and it is indeed quite puzzling how your name was called but—”

“Ah, forget about it, Albus! They only implemented the whole age restriction last year anyway!” Bagman interrupted Dumbledore, his voice booming excitedly in the small room.

The door opened again and everyone in the room turned to look as Prof. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime entered the room, angry and offended scowls on their faces. “Professor, Hogwarts will be letting another boy enter the tournament! How was this permitted?” Krum asked his headmaster.

“I would like to know that myself, Dumbledore.” Karkaroff said coldly, looking at Dumbledore in anger.

“*C’est impossible!* Hogwarts cannot have *two* champions! It is most unfair!” Madame Maxime agreed, resting her large hand on Fleur’s delicate shoulder.

“Your age line was supposed to keep younger students from joining the tournament, Dumbledore... How is it that a younger student of yours has entered right under your nose?” Karkaroff asked spitefully.

“It’s not as if I wanted to join in the first place.” Harry said sarcastically, causing Karkaroff to glare at him resentfully. Harry gave the man a mocking smile, wanting nothing more than to punch his lights out.

“Now Harry... I’m surprised at you... Is that anyway to talk to our...*guests*? Where are your manners?” Snape drawled slowly as he entered the room, an amused smile on his face as he had clearly enjoyed Harry embarrassing Karkaroff like that.

Harry only scowled in response, letting another sneer form on his face as Snape put a hand on Harry’s shoulder and made him step back from lunging at Karkaroff. “Excuse me, Professor.” Harry said, a fake apologetic smile or rather, sneer on his face as he and Snape exchanged looks of amusement.

Dumbledore looked at the two of them in warning as Karkaroff turned red in anger, clenching his hands into tight, furious fists.

“Anyway, Harry, did you or did you not put your name in the Goblet of fire?” Dumbledore asked Harry, trying to examine the sincerity in the boy’s eyes.

Unfortunately for him, Harry’s eyes were once again masked and emotionless that no one could tell what he was feeling at the moment. Yet, he nodded slowly, frowning at the people around him.

“No, Professor. I. Did. *Not*.” He answered calmly.

“Ah but of course, ‘e is lying!” Madame Maxime screeched out loud, causing Harry’s hands to clench dangerously in irritation.

“I assure you, *Madame Maxime*,” Harry mocked, saying her name as though it was a disgusting word. “I had nothing to do with my name being in the goblet of fire. How the hell was I supposed to know that my housemates would want me to be their champion that much?” Harry retorted derisively, causing Dumbledore to look sharply at him again.

Madame Maxime gasped and took a step back in shock. No one had ever dared to answer her like that before.

“*Harry!*” Dumbledore reprimanded lightly, sighing in exasperation.

“Sorry again, Professor.” Harry deadpanned, biting his lip to keep from smirking as he and Snape exchanged amused looks again.

“Then maybe Dumbledore made a mistake with the line! I shall have Viktor pulled out of this tournament if we have to play against *two* Hogwarts champions!” Karkaroff ranted.

“It is possible for me to make mistakes, of course...” Dumbledore said politely.

“Dumbledore, you know very well you couldn’t have made a mistake with the line! Those are ludicrous accusations, Igor!” Snape snapped, glaring at the other man. “Indeed, Karkaroff. Besides, you can’t leave your champion now. He has to compete. Binding magical contract. Convenient eh?” A voice pointed out.

They turned to see Moody enter the room, limping towards the fire towards them, his wooden leg making loud 'clunks' with every step he took. "I don't understand what you mean by that, Moody." Karkaroff said coldly, his hands clenched tightly.

"It's quite obvious, Karkaroff. Someone must have obviously put Potter's name in the goblet knowing he'd have to compete it out." Moody said simply.

"Someone who wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" Madame Maxime butted in indignantly.

"I agree with Madame Maxime. I shall be complaining to the Ministry of Magic about this and—"

"If anyone should complain, it's Potter." Moody interrupted Karkaroff, looking at Harry intently as though willing him to speak. Harry couldn't help but respect Moody at the moment as heads turned and looked at him expectantly.

He opened his mouth to say a word but Fleur cut him off. "Why should 'e complain? 'E 'as ze chance to compete for his school's 'onor! Zis is a chance many would die for!" She exclaimed, stamping her foot incredulously.

Harry felt a surge of anger as he turned to look at Fleur, his emerald eyes flashing dangerously. "Maybe *someone* is hoping I *am* willing to *die* for it." He spat out angrily, not being able to prevent the bitterness in his voice.

No one in the room spoke a word after that as only Snape and Moody dared to look at Harry, who was glaring darkly at the floor, his anger radiating from his stiff form. Fleur bit her lip and looked down guiltily, wanting to take back her words.

Harry raised his cold, penetrating eyes and locked gazes with Moody. Moody, who had obviously had the same idea Harry had, nodded with understanding and agreement.

“Harry, dear boy! What a thing to say!” Bagman exclaimed, breaking the tense silence as he rested a hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry flinched and pulled back abruptly, scowling at him.

“Yes, Potter. Aren’t you being a tad bit too suspicious?” Karkaroff sneered.

Harry’s eyes flashed darkly.

“Suspicious? It’s obvious that whoever the hell put Harry’s name inside the damn goblet wants him dead! Why else would that wizard have hoodwinked such a powerful object such as the goblet of fire?!” Moody pointed out.

“It seems as though you have given this a lot of thought, Moody.” Karkaroff said coldly.

“It is my job to think as dark wizards do, Igor, as you remember yourself...” Moody said snidely.

“*Alastor!*” Dumbledore said sternly, causing Moody to just smirk at Karkaroff in silence.

It seemed another uncomfortable moment was about to reign in the room again until Cedric finally spoke up, looking quite unsure of what to say in the current situation in front of him.

“Erm, so how do we do this, Headmaster?” He asked softly, looking at Dumbledore with a genuinely puzzled look on his face. Dumbledore sighed, turning to look at Harry. “Well, since both you and Harry have been selected by the goblet of fire, binding magical contract requires you to compete and—”

“Ah, but Dumbly-Dorr—”

“My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I’d be glad to hear it.” Dumbledore cut her off from interrupting him.

No one in the room dared to answer.



Madame Maxime and Karkaroff looked absolutely livid while Snape was trying to hide a smirk behind his hand. Moody was still glaring darkly at Karkaroff in suspicion while Harry was looking at the headmaster as though he had grown two more heads.

“But Headmaster, you can’t mean that! I still have to compete in this thing?!” He demanded furiously.

“I’m afraid so, Harry. Any witch or wizard chosen by the goblet of fire is required to compete in the tournament.” Dumbledore repeated again with an apologetic smile that made Harry’s blood boil in annoyance. He exhaled sharply, running a hand through his now wild hair in frustration.

“Well, now that that’s all settled, why don’t we get going then?” Bagman asked cheerfully. “Barty will you do the honors?” He asked just as Mr. Crouch walked into the room. Mr. Crouch looked as though he had been snapped out of his reverie. “Yes... Yes... get let’s get going...” He said dazedly.

Everyone watched as the firelight illuminated his strained face, looking as though he had not had a decent night’s sleep.” The first task of the tournament is designed to test how daring you are so we are not going to tell you what it is.” He told Harry, Cedric, Fleur and Krum.

“Courage is a very important factor you must remember in this task. It will be held on November the 24th, in front of the other judges and the other students. You are all not allowed to ask any kind of help from your teachers and you are only to be given your wand during the task itself. Instructions for the second task will be given after the first task.” He continued tonelessly.

Cedric, Fleur and Krum all nodded while Harry just rolled his eyes to himself, preventing a smirk on his face. “Also, we all know you are going to like this one, since you’re going to be preparing a lot for this tournament, you’ll be exempted from the finals.” Bagman said jovially, grinning at them.

*Well at least I’ll have some kind of great incentive for this somehow...* Harry thought to himself. “Well, if that’s all, then may I then ask the

both of you to stay the night?" Dumbledore asked Crouch and Bagman.

"I'm afraid not. I really must be heading on back to the ministry." Crouch replied.

"Aw, come on Barty! I'm staying! After all, Hogwarts will be pretty exciting now that all the action will be happening here!" Bagman boomed, clapping a hand on both Harry and Cedric's shoulders, causing Cedric to give a polite half-wince, half-smile and Harry to growl under his breath.

"Well then, Madame Maxime, Prof. Karkaroff... A *nightcap*?" Dumbledore offered cheerfully but the two of them were already escorting their champions out of the room, grumbling to themselves.

Harry was watching them go just as Fleur turned around and gave him a smile. "Good luck, though, anyway, 'Arry." She said, before turning back and walking out the door.

Harry gave her a forced smile, Snape watching him with an amused, yet almost fatherly look. Dumbledore sighed and turned to give Harry and Cedric an encouraging smile.

"Harry, Cedric, I suggest that the two of you head on back up to bed. I am sure Slytherin and Hufflepuff are waiting to congratulate the two of you." He said. Harry turned to look at Snape, who nodded at him, and then at Cedric, who nodded at Dumbledore and headed out of the door.

Harry followed after him through the long empty corridor, falling into step with the Hufflepuff in silence. "So, I guess we'll be playing each other again." Cedric said, giving Harry a smile.

"It would appear so, Diggory." Harry replied sarcastically, a resentful look on his face directed at the other boy. Cedric politely ignored his snide remark, shrugging. "I'm just curious though, exactly how *did* you get your name in the goblet of fire, Harry?"

Harry stopped abruptly in his tracks and turned to face the other boy, his green eyes flashing dangerously. "Just what the hell do you mean

by that?! Didn't I make it perfectly clear to Dumbledore that I *didn't* put my name in?!" Harry raged.

Cedric shifted, looking extremely uncomfortable under the Slytherin's penetrating glare. "Sorry, Harry, not to be blunt but it's just that lying would downright be right up your alley. I just thought you said that so that no one would find out." He answered truthfully.

Harry glared at him darkly. "How my damn name got into that goblet, I don't know Diggory but it sure is hell isn't your business." He retorted coldly.

Cedric looked a little angry now as shot Harry an indignant look. "You know, I really don't know why you act so rude and uncivilized to me. I've done nothing to you to make me your enemy. We could at least try to make things friendly between us." He pointed out.

Harry sneered, walking on as though he had not heard what Cedric had said. "In your dreams, *Hufflepuff*" Harry said in disgust. "Oh, and before I forget, never *ever* call me by my first name again. We're not exactly *friends* you know." Harry mocked, heading off towards the Slytherin dungeons.

Cedric sighed and walked off in the opposite directions, shaking his head. *Slytherins...* He thought.

*Stupid Diggory...* Harry thought as he walked through the silence of the Slytherin corridors, the lights flickering on as he passed them.

Harry let out a frustrated sigh as he thought of what they had been discussing earlier. Someone wanted him dead, that he was sure of... Why else would he have gone through so much just to make sure my name was called?

Maybe he was just being paranoid, but he had a sudden eerie feeling that something was here... At *Hogwarts*... He had recognized this feeling before... It was the same feeling he had whenever something unexpected and dark would happen. He had the very same ones in his first and second year when Voldemort had attempted to bring him down once again.

And he felt it again now... What exactly does that all mean? *Who the hell put my name in that goblet??* He asked himself as he rounded a corner.

He knew it couldn't have been any of his friends or any of the Slytherins for that matter because they knew very well the consequences of not following his orders but the question was, would they all believe him when he told them that he didn't put his name in as well?

*If they don't believe me, they could go ask Granger, for all I care. She'd be telling the truth when she tells them I was with her, last night...* He thought, not being able to prevent a smirk from forming on his face.

But still, he had a feeling that something was definitely wrong about the entire scenario...Like there was something he didn't realize and it was right under his nose. He just didn't know exactly what that was...

Harry was brought out of his reverie when he reached the entrance to the Slytherin common room, where he stopped abruptly and muttered the password, (*Snake Fang*) before promptly entering the common room.

He was immediately greeted with another round of smoldering applause as he saw each and every one of his housemates in the common room waiting for him, clapping at him approvingly with identical smiles on their faces.

Harry masked his surprise by a knowing smile as he read a huge banner hung in the common room with the words, "Harry Potter, the pride of Slytherin". Almost immediately, he was flanked by Draco, who handed him a bottle of butterbeer, taking a long swig of his own bottle as well.

Draco grinned at him and steered him around the room by the tight grip he had on Harry's shoulder, showing him everything the Slytherins had prepared for him while all their housemates shook Harry's hand the minute he passed them.

“They all want to say congratulations, scar boy!” Draco said, smirking when Harry glared at him for his hated nickname. He held back an exhausted yawn as he took a long swig of butterbeer himself before turning to grin at his housemates around him.

“Aw, you all shouldn’t have! I’m touched!” He mocked sarcastically, pretending to wipe a tear from his eye. They all laughed in response and gave him a cheer in return.

“What do you say we celebrate the night, Potter?” Draco said as he flicked his wand over the corner of the room, causing a variety of junk food and more bottles of butter beer to appear.

“I’m not really in the mood for it, Draco, I—”

“Harry!! Congratulations, we’re so proud of you!” A pretty blonde seventh-year girl cooed, coming over to give Harry a brief kiss on the lips. Draco smirked at this, avoiding another seventh year girl himself who had aimed to kiss him too.

“Mmm... Thank you Fiona...” Harry said, flashing the girl his charming, winning smile. The girl smiled back and reached a slender limb around him to pinch his behind, causing Harry to jump slightly in surprise.

Fiona laughed and gave him a wink, her eyes showing the younger Slytherin exactly how much she anticipated his reaction. “I’ll tell you one thing you definitely best Diggory at, Potter... You obviously have a cuter butt..” She said flirtatiously, giving him a peck on the cheek.

Harry couldn’t help but blush in response while Draco let out a snort of laughter at the stupid smile on his best friend’s face. “Why thank you, Fiona... I like the curves on your butt too, if you must know.” He returned, grinning as Fiona laughed, shaking her head as she began making her way over to the refreshments.

As soon as she had left, he yanked Draco towards him to whisper something to him in secret. “I have to tell you something important later. Can we sneak out to the library around 3 AM? It’s really urgent.” Harry hissed.

Draco looked at his best friend curiously but nodded as the other Slytherins began crowding around Harry, congratulating him for being one of the champions of the tournament.

Exhausted and halfway drunk, Harry made his way up to the girls' dorms to look for this twin when he saw her sprawled over her bed, staring up at the ceiling silently. Managing a small smile, he walked over and collapsed on the bed beside her, groaning to himself.

"Hey, what are you doing up here by yourself, sis? Why aren't you downstairs enjoying yourself?" Harry asked, closing his eyes sleepily.

"Like I would really be celebrating about *your* success..." She muttered scornfully, her eyes narrowed in better anger.

Harry's eyes popped open as he heard this as he stared at her in shock, not wanting to believe what he had heard. "What did you say?" He asked, his eyes wide and his jaw hanging open.

AJ just gave him a sickeningly sweet smile and sat up immediately, grimacing slightly at him. "Nothing at all. ... *Congratulations...*" She said sarcastically, her emerald-green eyes flashing dangerously at him.

Harry sat up too, stunned by the bitterness and anger he heard in her voice. "What's that supposed to mean, AJ?" He demanded furiously, narrowing his eyes at her.

AJ sneered at him in response, her eyes glinting malevolently.

"You figure it out, *champion*. I guess you got what you wanted huh? Must be hard to be the famous, Harry Potter... Has to be on top of everything all the time..." She taunted, scowling at him.

"*What?! I don't understand you at all, AJ, I really—*"

"You don't *understand* me, Harry? Well then *understand* this, I thought for once that you would actually lay off on your foolish pride and *not* get involved in this tournament but here you go again, getting yourself involved in stupid situations you can't even handle! Don't you

ever think about anything else but your reputation, Harry?!" AJ exploded, glaring at him.

Harry looked angry now as he looked at his twin sister with a hateful snarl, glowering at her. "AJ, you know how much I hate it when people assume things about me. Don't you start doing it too. You should know that I did *not* want to join this *fucking* tournament in the first place! It wasn't my decision!" He retorted.

AJ scoffed at him, rolling her eyes as she turned and looked away.

"Wasn't your decision?! Are you sure, Harry? Sounds to me from the way you reacted earlier, you *wanted* this to happen. Whatever sick excuse you have now, I don't want to hear it. You're risking your *life* for this stupid tournament, Harry! Did you ever think about that? Huh? This is not just some stupid game or anything! You could actually *die* for this, Harry! I have no idea why you would stoop so low just to be able to prove yourself to everyone!" She ranted angrily.

"Look, don't you think I know that already, AJ?! I *know* someone wants me to die and I *know* that I am way over my head when I think I can do this but I did *not* put my name in that damn goblet! Did it ever occur to you that someone else might have wanted me dead and put my name in there in attempt for that?!" He countered angrily.

AJ laughed bitterly, sneering at him. "Someone wants you *dead*? Don't try to blame this on anyone else Harry, because no one else could have done it but *you*. And contrary to what you believe, the world does *not* revolve around you so much that people want you dead most of the time. You don't have to lie to me, *how* did you get your name in?" She demanded.

Harry felt a strong surge of anger as he bolted up and stared down at his sister in disbelief.

"I did *not* put my *fucking* name in that goblet!! Can't you get that AJ?! I would have thought that being my sister, you would believe me but it seems to me, you're the one who's contradicting me! Look, if I would be given the chance, I would drop out of this tournament anyway but I have no choice!" He argued.

“Right, and you knew that, didn’t you Harry? You knew you would be *forced* to participate in the tournament if you got chosen. You had it all planned out and you never told me. And I actually thought you had a good head on our shoulders when you refused Draco and Blaise persuading you to join.” She muttered darkly to herself but Harry heard every word she said.

“There was *nothing* to tell you because I didn’t plan anything out! And besides, why do I have to get your permission for anything?!” Harry snapped.

AJ’s jaw dropped in insult and rage. “Harry, I’m your *sister*! I have a right to know if you’re going to join this tournament because you could get *killed*! I put up with all the crazy shit you got yourself into before but *dammit* Harry! I will *not* put up with *this*! Don’t you understand that?! I didn’t want you involved with this because I don’t want you to risk your life!” She protested.

“Well there’s nothing we could do about that now. And if you don’t want to believe me, then that’s your own damn decision...It’s not as if I was ever forcing you to bear with me...” Harry responded coldly before he turned away from her and walked out of the room in silence.

AJ just stared after his back as he slammed the door, leaving her alone in the empty dormitory. Very slowly, hot, angry tears began cascading silently down her face, betraying the furious look on her delicate features.

“I just don’t want to lose you, Harry...You’re the only family I have left...I just don’t know how I could live on if you were gone...” She whispered, finally breaking down and collapsing back on the bed and burying her face in her pillow, her soft sobs echoing in the silence of the room.

*I can’t believe this! Now even AJ doesn’t believe me!* Harry thought angrily as he glared into the fire later that night when everyone else had gone to sleep, mentally wishing that he could be devoured in the flames as well.

The fire left an eerie glow on the empty common room, casting Harry’s shadow on the walls. *Why do these things always happen to*



*me?! What the hell do I do to deserve this?!* Harry asked the flames silently, obviously not expecting an answer.

“*What* kind of things happen to you, Potter?” A voice suddenly asked out of nowhere, startling Harry and causing him to flinch lightly in surprise.

Draco sniggered to himself as he plopped down on the armchair beside Harry, looking at him intently. “What are you still doing up?!” Harry snapped, glaring at him.

Draco raised a single eyebrow in confusion.

“Potter, I really don’t understand you at times. If you do recall, you told me to meet you around this time earlier tonight because you needed to talk to me about something. What’s up?” He asked.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair, grumbling slightly to himself. “Sorry, Draco I guess I couldn’t keep track of the time since AJ and I had a fight earlier. I couldn’t stop thinking about it...” He said.

Draco looked at him in surprise. “You and AJ had a fight? Why? What happened?” He asked curiously.

“Never mind, Draco. It’s not important.” Harry said coldly, obviously not wanting to elaborate on the subject.

Draco didn’t force him on the subject. He knew better than to pry in on his best friend’s personal life when Harry didn’t want him to. He knew it wasn’t his business and he knew that Harry appreciated him for it.

“Anyway, I wanted to ask you something, Draco and I want you to answer me as honestly as you can, alright?” Harry asked slowly, his cold emerald eyes glaring at Draco threateningly.

Draco held his own against his glare, nodding in challenge. “Did you or did you not put my name in the goblet of fire?” Harry asked him sharply.

Draco's eyes widened at Harry's dark, accusing glare at him, a scowl forming on his features. "The *fuck*?! Harry, are you accusing me?!" Draco demanded furiously.

"Think of it anyway you want to, Draco. Just answer my question." Harry replied coldly.

Draco just glared at him in silence before shaking his head firmly, his scowl darkening. "No, Potter. I did *not*. I don't even know why you would accuse me of a thing as low as that. I thought all this time; *you* put your name in the goblet." He said.

Harry let out a frustrated sigh, slamming his fist on the arm rest of his armchair. "Well I *didn't*, Draco! I actually meant what I said when I told you all that I didn't want to join this tournament! I only pretended to agree because I didn't want anyone finding out that I didn't want to join... I want out of this whole thing..." Harry said.

Draco watched him carefully, noticing the desperate, helpless look in his eyes that only those who were close to Harry could recognize. "You actually don't want to be the Slytherin champion, Harry?" Draco asked him.

Harry just stared into the fire, silently cursing the fire for being so strong while he was so weak... *I'm pathetic*... He thought angrily to himself.

"It's not that.... To tell you the truth, I'm honored but I just do *not* want to risk my life just for this pointless tournament. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to ask you, Draco... I was wondering if your father had told you anything about what might be happening nowadays... I have a strong feeling..." Harry said, his voice trailing off.

"Well... No, not really. Father doesn't really tell me much about stuff as serious as that. Why?" Draco asked him.

"Because... I have a feeling someone may have entered my name into this tournament... Someone who definitely wants to see me dead..." Harry said darkly, more to himself than to anyone else.

Draco didn't respond, just gazing into the fire in shocked silence. "Are you sure, Harry?" He asked nervously, obviously shaken up by the news.

Harry's eyes glinted dangerously, a malicious twinkle in them. "Sure as *hell*, Draco..." He whispered, slowly clenching his hands into tight fists.

The two sat in a tense silence for a long time, both of them just fighting with their own thoughts before Harry stood up abruptly, pulling out his wand and whispering a summoning charm for his invisibility cloak.

Draco stood up as well, looking at him in question. "Where are you going, Harry?" He asked.

"I'm heading to the library. I don't know about you but I reckon those dark arts books are the only things that can calm me down right now..." He answered, snatching the cloak that came floating towards him in mid-air.

Draco jumped up abruptly and snatched the cloak from him, throwing it over them with a grin on his face. "What are you doing, Draco?" Harry asked, annoyed.

"I'm sure as hell not going to let you expose yourself to those dark arts by yourself. I'm coming with you, that way you'll have someone who actually knows how to handle the arts with you." Draco said with a superior smile.

Harry couldn't help a laugh as Draco led the two of them out of the common room to the library in silence, both boys not wanting to cause any suspicion by making a lot of noise.

"I hope you appreciate all the shit I am doing for you, Potter." Draco hissed to him as they froze in their place when Mrs. Norris sauntered through the corridor, her eyes briefly resting on them for a minute before she rounded the corner, her tail swishing behind her.

When the two reached the library, Harry directly went to the restricted section, ignoring Draco, who was nervously looking behind them to

make sure no one had followed them. "This is absolutely crazy, Harry!" Draco suddenly hissed at him, shaking his head as he followed after Harry.

Harry didn't answer as a certain book caught his attention. Draco watched as Harry pulled out a thick, black book with an emblem of silver serpent on the cover. Harry's emerald-green eyes widened as the blood red eyes of the serpent seemed to flash at him, briefly entrancing him as he seemed to stare at it in reverence.

Slightly annoyed, Draco snatched the book from his hands, inspecting it and reading the title out loud. "*Forbidden Prophecies, the Blood of the Serpents*" He read, frowning at the meaning of the title.

"You want to read *this*, Harry?" He asked incredulously.

"Give that to me, Malfoy!" Harry growled, snatching the book from Draco and suddenly opening it.

The book seemed to glow slightly in Harry's hands and almost immediately, the book flashed a dark, blood red, making a loud, whooshing sound as Harry was hurled across the entire room violently, his body slamming against the cold, hard wall on the opposite side.

Eyes wide with fear, Draco dropped the still glowing book still held in his hands, his hands slightly shaking. *Shit... Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all...* He thought.

As soon as the book touched the floor, its eerie light died out as its pages shut abruptly, leaving the two boys in a frightening silence once again. "Harry! You alright?" Draco yelled in panic, finally snapping back to his senses as he ran over to help him stand up.

Harry cringed slightly in pain, wiping a stream of blood that had run down his chin. Nodding silently, he eyed the book on the floor with an unreadable expression, gasping in pain again when his scar suddenly burned into him intensely.

More out of desperation than anything else, Harry raced across the room and grabbed the book, shoving it back into the shelf he got it from.

Draco looked at him in question as Harry leaned against the shelf, breathing heavily with his eyes tightly shut. "What was that all about, Harry?" He asked. Harry opened his eyes, still breathing heavily.

"I don't have a fucking idea Draco and frankly, I don't want to know either. Let's just get going back to our dorms, we'll check out these other books some other time. My body aches all over..." He said.

Draco nodded, eyeing the book cautiously as they grabbed the invisibility cloak and headed on back to their common room, neither of them daring to say anything about what had happened at the moment.

"AJ!"

AJ turned around as she recognized Draco's voice, seeing him rushing down the corridor towards her as she was heading off to her afternoon class the next day.

AJ's eyes widened slightly in surprise as she felt her pulse speed up at the sight of Draco's lean frame, his silver-blond hair slightly tousled from running after her.

Annoyed and confused at her reaction, she shook her head at herself and desperately tried to squelch her rapidly beating heart. Draco stopped in front of her, panting for breath, his silver eyes sparkling.

"Malfoy, what do you bloody want? I'm late for class, as you can obviously see." She snapped weakly, her eyes tired and dull as they stared at Draco's vibrant silver orbs.

Draco gave her a glare, raising an eyebrow in annoyance. "In case you left your brain somewhere in the dungeons again, Potter, I think you've somehow forgotten about the fact that we have the same class next." He pointed out, checking his watch.

AJ's green eyes flashed to life. "Draco, spare me the arguments okay? I am so not in the mood for your antics right now. If you don't have anything intelligent to say to me then can we just walk on in *silence* to the classroom? I want to be left alone." She snapped, slapping his hand away from her.

"Oh...I see...Well, well...Look who's Ms. Cranky today... What's the matter Potter? You and your idiot of a twin get into a fight *again*? Or is it plainly because you have your period this week?" He taunted, his eyes light and teasing.

AJ raised a hand and punched him right in the shoulder, her face twisting into a hideous scowl of anger. "Draco, just *leave me alone you stupid jerk!* I don't want to talk to you right now!!" She screamed at him furiously, shoving him away from her and stalking down the corridor.

Draco's eyes widened this time as he instantly tore after her, grabbing her arm and yanking her around to face him once more so she caught a glimpse of the brief hurt in his eyes. "Whoa, whoa, whoa... You've obviously got a problem there, Potter...Usually you call me *arrogant, stupid, idiotic and egoistic jerk*...You obviously forgot the *arrogant, idiotic and egoistic* part. What's wrong?" He asked, his voice strangely gentle as he spoke.

AJ finally cracked a weak grin for him, causing the blonde to visibly relax in relief. She felt her knees buckle weakly when Draco's hand gently touched her cheek in a tender caress, his beautiful eyes peering intently into her own. Feeling incredibly ashamed at having blown up at him, she took a step away from the boy and shrugged, managing to give him a disarming smile.

"I-I'm sorry, Draco...I just... I've just been having a bad week, lately... Uhm..Anyway, was there anything you wanted to talk to me about?" She finally asked him softly as they both made their way to their Arithmancy classroom.

"Uhm, actually, that was what I was going to ask you but I doubt I'll get the chance if we take this next class so what do you say, just this once, we skip Vector's class?" Draco asked mischievously, grinning at her.

“Are you crazy?! Skip Arithmancy? Draco, this is a very important class and I do not want to miss out on any of the lessons—”

Draco smirked and put a hand to her mouth, stifling the rest of her sentence. “I assure you, AJ. This is something important...It’s about you opening up to me what really happened between you and your brother.” He said, giving her a pointed look.

AJ immediately scowled as Draco took his hand away from her mouth, allowing him to see the girl’s snarl. “What about him? What other shit has he gotten himself into this time?” She grumbled, turning away from Draco.

Before Draco could answer, AJ cut him off, answering her own question.

“No, you know what?! Forget it, I don’t care. I don’t care what else he gets himself into and if he’s willing to die for earning himself honor because obviously, he doesn’t care about what I think anyway so just...Just *leave me alone*.” She snapped angrily at him, shoving him away in an attempt to hide the pain in her eyes.

Draco sighed as he followed after her towards the Arithmancy classroom, where they both stopped at the entrance.

“Well, obviously you won’t know exactly what about him I have to tell you if you don’t agree to skip this class with me... Come on, AJ. What’s more important to you? Your twin brother or your high grades?” Draco asked her pointedly.

AJ looked into the empty classroom where already, students had entered, waiting for the lesson to start as Prof. Vector began writing complex formulas on the board.

*Who the hell does he think he is, asking me that? Who the hell is ‘he’ to interfere with our problems like this?! Stupid jerk...* She thought bitterly with a stony expression, thinking of how Harry had reacted to her concern the night before.

She had been crying the whole night that the first thing Blaise and Pansy had told her when they saw her first thing in the morning was *"You look like shit."*

That and *"You're up?!"* since she had actually surprised them when she woke up hours before they did, staring out of the window as the others girls slept on.

She had made sure to wake up early since she had been avoiding her twin the whole day in any possible way she could.

She knew her brother noticed this since she had actually seen a hurt, remorseful expression on her twin's face before she rushed out of potions, not wanting to have to talk to him.

She knew Harry.

She knew how strong his pride was that he would not be willing to apologize first if ever they got into a fight and argument but she also knew that there were... These certain moments... that his eyes actually gave him away to her.

She knew most people couldn't read Harry's emotionless eyes because they were always guarded but if they were to look closely enough, there were these actual times when his guard would fall down for a moment and expose the frailty and hostility he had inside.

In the past, this alone was enough for her to forgive him for something but she wasn't about to take it now.

*I don't want to be the one who keeps apologizing all my life!* She thought, her eyes filling slightly with tears again but this time she held them back and turned away, not wanting to break down in front of Draco.

Unfortunately, Draco seemed to notice her tears as he reached over in his pocket and pulled out a soft, white handkerchief. Surprisingly, he didn't make any rude, snide comments, merely giving her a solemn look which molded perfectly with his handsome features.



AJ felt her heart momentarily stop beating as Draco slowly tilted her chin up to face him, their eyes meeting briefly before Draco gently used the handkerchief to wipe the now freely cascading tears from her face.

This simple act alone was enough to make AJ lose it and break down altogether, her tears now freely falling down her face. Draco saw this and gently stroked her cheek, wrapping his arms around her in a comforting embrace.

“No...No don’t look at me!” AJ snapped weakly, trying to wrench herself out of his grasp but as soon as Draco’s arms had clasped around her, she couldn’t do anything else except collapse into him, crying against him softly and savoring the warmth and the comfort she found in his arms.

Draco said or did nothing else but give the girl a small, comforting smile before he gently scooped her up in his arms, carrying her frail, delicate form outside the castle where he sat them both near the lake’s edge. AJ failed to notice the fact that his arms didn’t seem to be loosening themselves around her.

He remained silent as he just let her cry against him, only whispering occasional soothing words to her or tightening his arms around her. Neither of them spoke a word as only AJ’s soft sobs could be heard in the calm, comforting silence.

After a long moment, AJ finally pulled away, her eyes slightly red from crying but she gave Draco a grateful smile, taking the handkerchief he offered to her to wipe her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Draco asked her in genuine concern, caressing her cheek comfortingly. AJ winced weakly in surprise as his hand sent a shiver down her spine, causing her to stiffen slightly.

Draco pulled his hand back immediately when he noticed this, looking a little embarrassed. “Sorry...” He mumbled, not meeting her gaze.

AJ watched him for a minute, her eyes clouding in curiosity before she finally allowed a smile, feeling a light blush creep up into her

cheeks again. "Don't say sorry, Draco... I... Well... Thanks... I guess I just needed that..." She said, managing a weak laugh.

Draco nodded, squeezing her hand back in response.

"I know, AJ. And the reason I wanted to talk to you was that, I just wanted you to know that whatever your twin may have said, I can really see how he regrets that now. You mean a lot to your brother, AJ. You should know that. You can't tell how hurt he looked when he found out that you were avoiding him. You should just talk to him." Draco told her.

AJ sighed. "Yeah, I know that Draco but obviously, Harry thinks I'm the one who's going to have to apologize first again. Unless he learns the hard way about admitting his own mistakes, I can't forgive him..." She said softly, turning away to look at the sunset in front of them.

Draco looked at the girl silently, briefly admiring how beautiful she looked in the glow of the slowly setting sun in front of them as the rays cast a magnificent streak of light on her hair.

Before he could stop himself, he leaned over and tucked the strand of hair brushing against her cheek behind her ear and planted a soft kiss on her cheek, causing the girl's eyes to widen slowly.

Blushing, she turned her head and looked at him questioningly, searching his eyes.

Draco's cheeks tinged slightly with pink but he gave her a laugh, shaking his head. "Just a belief of mine that when you see the sun set, you should kiss someone you *lo*—You um...Because that person is bound to...um...No, forget it...It's stupid really..." He lied, forcing a laugh.

"No, Draco, tell me what is it?" AJ asked, giving him a curious smile as Draco colored again, his face suddenly transforming into an irritated grimace. "Forget it, Potter, leave it alone! You annoying idiot, why are you so damn nosy anyway?" He snapped but as soon as the words had left his lips, he wanted to eat them right back.

Instantly, AJ's smile melted into a frown and she glared at him, feeling her eyes flash up in annoyance. "*Idiot?* You're calling *me* an idiot?! You're the one who believes in stupid little superstitions about the sunset...And what was that kiss for, Malfoy? You want to make me sick?!" She retorted, a resentful sneer on her face.

Draco's cheeks flushed. "Hey! It's not as if I *wanted* to kiss an ugly troll like *you*! I guess it was only bad luck on *my* part that the only person I was with during a sunset was *you*, Potter!" He answered back, glaring at her.

"And my superstitions are *not* stupid! At least I actually *have* something to believe in, which is something I can't really say about *you*." Draco added, throwing her a smirk.

At first it looked as though AJ was about to ready to slap him right in the face but as soon as she leaned forward and saw the hidden mirth and laughter dancing in Draco's eyes, she gave in and started laughing again.

Draco froze abruptly, confused before he allowed himself to crack a small grin, which later led to another round of merry, pointless laughter. "Potter...You're a nut you know that? First it seemed as though you wanted to tear my crotch off...Now you're laughing..." Draco marveled, shaking his head.

AJ laughed again, giving the blonde a rueful grin before she willed herself to calm down, looking out into the beautiful lake again. "Thanks, though, Draco. I really appreciate you doing this for me but I guess, I'll have to let Harry be the one to decide what to do next this time..." She said.

Draco fused his eyebrows at her. "If that's what you think, AJ... But don't give him a hard time, okay? You know, I never told you before but I have always envied you and Harry. You know why?" He asked.

AJ pointed to the scar on her forehead but Draco just smirked and grabbed her hand, gently pushing it back down.

"No, not the scar, AJ. I have always envied the two of you because though you never met your mother and father, you've always had

each other. I'm an only child. I never got to experience love from a sibling. I've always felt as though I had to do everything by myself but you and Harry... You will always look at life thinking that it's something you both can face together." Draco said.

AJ felt her heart melt at his words as she flashed him a grateful, teary smile, hugging him as tight as she could. When she let him go, she laughed and wiped her eyes, mock scowling at him. "You made me cry again, Malfoy!" She teased, swatting him lightly on the arm.

Draco laughed. "Thanks so much, Draco... You're such a great guy... I feel so lucky to have you as a friend... You're the best." AJ said, smiling at him.

Draco heart sank as he heard the word "friend" but he hid it well and returned her smile, nodding.

"Well, I guess I'd better get going. Thanks again, Drac. I owe you one..." AJ said as she leaned forward to give him a gentle, affectionate kiss on the cheek but Draco moved his face so that her lips landed on his own, allowing him to briefly caress her lips very gently and faintly with his own before she pulled back abruptly, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Not anymore, Potter..."

Draco looked back up and smiled at her, his silver eyes twinkling mischievously and at the same time making her heart start pounding against her chest. AJ blinked, shaking her head and offering him a small, nervous smile before she turned and hurried off back to the castle, more than willing to never mention that accidental kiss from her mind, Draco staring after her with an amused smile on his handsome face.

AJ hurriedly rushed down the corridor in embarrassment, not looking where she was going until she finally managed to bump into someone, sending them both crashing to the floor. Slightly panicked at looking as though she had cried an entire river, AJ turned her face away from the person she had hoped not to bump into the most.

“Oh, do watch where you’re going Potter!” Ron snapped as he recovered his books from the floor.

AJ didn’t respond as she grasped her wand and quietly whispered a spell to hide her red, puffy eyes temporarily, before she turned and faced him again with a sneer.

Ron looked up the same time AJ stood up, dusting herself haughtily. “You know you love bumping into me, Weasley...” She taunted, raising an eyebrow seductively.

Ron glared at her, standing up and brushing his robes off as well. AJ just chuckled and stepped forward, causing the Gryffindor to step backward in surprise. “What the—what are you doing, Potter?” Ron asked, gulping as his ears turned red.

“Relax, Weasley, I was just going to fix your collar.” She said, enticingly adjusting his collar. “All done.” She said in a mockingly cheerful tone, smirking and heading off, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

As soon as Ron was out of earshot, she let out a huge breath of relief and lifted the spell away from her eyes, making her eyes the same red, puffy state they were before. Considering she had just bumped into her all-time crush, it would be right for her to be thinking of him right now but contrary to what just happened, she couldn’t stop thinking about Draco.

*Draco didn’t mean to kiss me...We both just made an innocent mistake by meeting our lips accidentally. It’s not as though he kissed me on purpose, anyway...* She thought as she rushed to the Common Room, slightly flushed.

But as she entered the empty common room, one question popped into her head.

*Isn’t it?*

*Dear Sirius,*

*Well, you told me to keep you updated on news happening around here so I wrote to tell you that yeah, something definitely happened here that you should know about. I'm sure by now you've heard that the TriWizard tournament will be happening here at Hogwarts this year but I'm not sure if you've heard about the part that I'm the fourth champion. Yup, you read it right, FOURTH champion. However, don't think I put my name in the goblet of fire because I didn't. That's the very reason AJ and I had a misunderstanding in the first place. Don't ask... Anyway, I'm thinking this someone put my name in the goblet of fire to have me killed... Won't say anymore here. Say hello to Buckbeak for me. Hope you're well.*

*Harry*

Harry reread the letter for the third time before he was sure he didn't have any more corrections, tying the letter to Hedwig's leg and sending her off through the window in the owlery, watching her disappear in the distance.

Closing the window, he walked over and stroked Ferio, his twin's owl, making the owl hoot happily and ruffle his feathers. *At least you're not mad at me... Your master is...* Harry thought sadly, his eyes dropping slightly.

"Harry!! Here you are! I've been looking all over for you! How's my champion boyfriend?!" A high, annoyingly bouncy voice squealed, making Harry clench his hands into fists in annoyance.

A second later, Harry felt two pairs of eager hands wrap around his waist as Parvati snuggled into him, sighing blissfully. Harry stiffened and pulled himself away from her arms, not bothering to look the girl in the eye.

"Parv, I'm not really in the mood right now...I'll talk to you later." Harry retorted rudely, picking up his school things which he had left on the floor.

"But Harry, I thought you and I could spend the afternoon together! I planned out a really nice picnic where we could—"

"I'm busy." Was the cold reply.

Parvati's face fell as she watched him gather his things silently, barely acknowledging her presence in the room. Now frustrated, she stomped over to him and yanked his things away, hurling them across the room before she glared at him, crossing her arms over her chest stubbornly.

Harry's eyes flashed as he stared at her in absolute anger, all the emotions he had been venting inside exploding out at her. "Bitch! What the *fuck* is your problem?! Why can't you just shut your trap and leave me the hell alone?!" He shouted furiously, slamming his fist against the wall.

Parvati jumped slightly at his explosion before tears began to well up inside her eyes, her lips forming itself into a pout as she glared at him.

"What's my *problem*? I'll tell you what my *problem* is, Harry! My *problem* is that whenever I seem to seek for your affection, you push me away! You always shun me off and you never seem to care about what I feel! Frankly, you have never been like a boyfriend to me at all! Sometimes I feel as though you're just using me!" Parvati wailed, sobbing, obviously expecting Harry to comfort her.

Harry just looked at her blankly, not at all making a move to comfort her. *Well, well, well...Perhaps she's not so stupid after all...* Harry thought to himself irritably.

"You ignore me when I'm with you and your friends and I hardly know a thing about you at all! I don't even know how you feel and you don't even care that your friends insult me or torment me or you simply just don't give a bloody hell if I'm hurting or not! I keep giving and giving and you just keep on taking! I'm always the one who gives up my time and my affection for you but you just don't seem to care, Harry!" She ranted continuously, causing Harry to grow more and more agitated at her endless babbling.

"Woman, are you finished now?" Harry asked flatly, checking his watch impatiently as he did.

“No, Harry, I’m not! I can’t take this anymore! You don’t even have any time for me except when you want to sleep together! And whenever I try to spend some time with you other than that, you push me off again! This is *not* a relationship, Harry! I refuse to be treated like this! You’ve never even taken me out or anything and sometimes, I even feel as though I’m like an *obligation* or something!” Parvati continued, scowling at him.

Harry rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to speak when Parvati cut him off again, making the boy clench his jaw in anger. *This girl just won’t stop talking...* He thought impatiently, growling to himself.

“I see all my friends and *their* boyfriends give them candies, roses, walk them to their classes, take them out to dinner but what have you done for me? *Nothing*! Harry, you just bloody ignore me! You barely notice me at all!! Don’t you love me, Harry?!” She cried, burying her face in her hands.

Harry didn’t answer her question. He just walked around her as though she was some sort of coat rack and retrieved his things from the floor, turning to walk out the door when Parvati grabbed his arm, making him face her teary, pleading face.

“Harry, please don’t leave me! I love you! Please! I’ll do anything you want me to! Please!! I can’t live without you, I need you!! I’ll go crazy without you!” She begged, crying as she forced herself into his arms, persistently burying her face in his chest.

Harry didn’t respond to her advances, not wrapping his arms around her but instead, just standing there, letting out an annoyed sigh before firmly putting his hands on her shoulders and gently pushing her away from him, holding her at arms length.

“Harry.... Please... I love you.... You can’t leave me... I didn’t mean what I said earlier... Just please stay... Say you love me too... *Please...*” Parvati pleaded, her normally perfect hair a wild tangled mess and dark mascara running messily down her cheeks.

Harry didn’t answer but instead, stared at her blankly again, this time with a colder glare on his expression.



Parvati's tearful eyes widened as she looked at him as though he was insane. "Say it!" She hissed desperately, cupping Harry's face with both her hands. "Say it!!" She hissed again this time more forcefully.

Harry finally let out a sigh, pulling himself away from her hands and heading for the door again. "Sorry Parv, but you were actually right all along. I *don't* love you. I was just having some fun like I always do. Frankly though, I don't like the expression on your face...You now how I am. I don't go for *serious* relationships... You were a lot of fun though, I'll give you that." Harry said, smirking as Parvati gasped in horror.

"Like all the other girls, once I get into a *relationship* too long, you all seem to bore me with your... *clinginess* and your *needy* attitude. It's something I really don't like to handle." Harry explained coolly.

Parvati glared at him with her jaw hanging open, her eyes blazing with immense anger and her cheeks burning with humiliation.

"Call me a liar but I just told you all those mushy lines because I just wanted to bed you. In other words, I *used* you. I just wanted a way to blow off some of my time." Harry continued casually, sneering at the girl's hateful look.

"Ah, you know you girls will always be the same to me, no matter what. All so easy to lure in... Especially you *Gryffindors*..." He said, chuckling.

Parvati was now shaking in absolute anger, wanting nothing more than to dig her claws into the smirking boy in front of her.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted, *baby* but I guess this is goodbye. Just one lesson you ought to learn about Harry Potter. *No one* can ever own him. I'm my own man and no woman will ever get the better of me." He said, giving the girl one last smirk before he turned abruptly and left the room, his robes once again making a dramatic swish behind him.

He barely had time to shut the door when he heard an extremely loud scream which sounded suspiciously like "*YOU GOOD-FOR-NOTHING BASTARD!!*" before he heard a loud sound of breaking

glass which sounded like the glass lamp of the owlery being hurled against the door.

Chuckling to himself in amusement, he made his way down to the corridors when he stopped as he saw a lone figure leaning against the wall, looking at him with a suspicious glance.

“Broke the bad news to your girlfriend, Potter?” Hermione asked resentfully, shaking her head in disgust at him.

Harry’s smirk instantly formed itself into a charming smile when he saw her emerge from the shadows. Still smiling, he stepped closer to the other girl. “Indeed...Although, it’s not exactly *bad news* for *you*, eh Granger?” He taunted.

“And just what do you mean by that, Potter?” She asked snidely, growling at him.

Harry laughed, shaking a finger at her. “You *coincidentally* being here the same time I break up with my so-called *girlfriend* is not something I should be suspicious of?” Harry asked as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“I just came to send a letter to my parents, Potter. Don’t push your luck.” Hermione replied automatically.

“*Riight*... Your *muggle* parents...” Harry said in disdain, sneering snobbishly at the idea.

Hermione felt a surge of irritation at his snobbish tone of voice. “Oh, you’re one to talk, Potter! You live with muggle relatives yourselves and your mother was a muggle-born wizard so you have no right to act so high and mighty all of a sudden.” She countered.

“Right... At least my father *and* my mother were wizards, even though my mother was a muggle-born one. And those creatures I live with are *not* my relatives. I’ve stopped being related to them years ago... They’re disgusting creatures...” Harry said hatefully.

“Must run in the family.”

Harry let out an amused smile. "Ooh... That's *harsh*... That one burned right through me Granger." He mocked.

"Right through the ego." She replied flippantly, walking around him the same way Harry had done to Parvati earlier and heading off.

Harry blinked, before letting out a chuckle and following after her, shaking his head. "You amuse me greatly, Granger. One of the things I find so interesting about you." He commented casually.

Hermione made a tutting sound, not bothering to answer back. "So, where you heading, Granger?" Harry asked in mock cheerfulness.

"Potions."

"Are you always this articulate?"

Hermione stopped and whirled around indignantly, glaring at him. "Cute, Potter. Really cute but that's not what I wanted to ask you at all." She said, looking at him suspiciously.

Harry raised a curious eyebrow at her. "Oh? What is it then?"

Hermione took a deep breath before looking straight at him, searching his eyes. "Well, I was wondering Potter... Do you have any idea how your name got into the goblet of fire?" She asked him.

Harry stiffened as he was prepared to snap at her again for accusing him but Hermione held a hand up to silence him, rolling her eyes to herself.

"No, I do *not* think you did it because if you have already forgotten, you were with me, last night." She said, her face darkening slightly as she remembered the painful, disappointing experience.

As much as she didn't want anyone finding out, she had actually believed Harry's fake lines that night, which was why it had hurt her so much when she found out his true intentions.

She had actually believed that he could actually truly care about her and he could actually be truly interested but she had been wrong.

She was just another one of those games to him and the idea had hurt...

She never wanted to fall for his ploys again... As low as Harry thought of her, she wasn't about to let him win her over by a couple of pathetic lines... She wasn't as stupid as the other girls he had dated. She wasn't weak.

Shaking the thoughts away, she glared at Harry expectantly. "I don't know, Granger... And frankly I don't care. It's over and done with and I honestly don't want to be thinking about this right now." He said coldly, turning away but Hermione was persistent.

"Har—I mean, Potter, whoever this person is, I reckon he may be trying to kill you." She told him.

Harry rolled his eyes, yanking his arm away from the girl. "Don't you think I know that already, Granger? I'm not stupid, okay? I know when there's another plot to kill the great Harry Potter myself. I don't need your help." Harry retorted.

"I just wanted to warn you, you ungrateful jerk! Although it seems I forgot that you're not the type to appreciate help anyway." Hermione said, shaking her head as she spun around and continued walking away, Harry calmly walking just a few steps behind her.

"Will you stop following me, Potter?!"

"Well, duh, we have the same class." Harry responded derisively, sniggering at her.

Hermione colored in embarrassment and bit her tongue to keep from arguing with him again, convincing herself that answering back will only encourage the jerk some more.

As soon as they reached Snape's classroom, they saw the other Gryffindors and Slytherins there already, waiting outside as Snape was finishing something up in his classroom before he started his class.

Hermione immediately sauntered over to her Gryffindor friends to get away from Harry as all the Slytherins looked up at Harry, giving the popular raven-haired boy a glance of recognition before going back to whatever they had been doing.

Harry was glad to see that Parvati wasn't among her other giggly friends. He didn't want to handle her bawling and her and her friends' hateful glares at him all throughout class. It was just bloody annoying.

Harry saw his twin sister talking to Blaise and Pansy but when she caught sight of him, she excused herself and walked further away from him as possible, not meeting his gaze.

Harry felt his heart sink but didn't have time to say anything as Draco and Blaise both flanked him; sleek, shiny black badges pinned on their robes. "Hey Potter, check these out! The third years made them for you." Blaise said, pointing to the black badge he wore.

Harry raised an eyebrow, reading the luminous green letters printed boldly on the badge.

***"Harry Potter, the SLYTHERIN champion"***

Shocked and flattered at the same time, Harry let out a smirk and shook his head, amused yet thrilled at his housemates for being so proud of him.

*Maybe that's why I had grown to love Slytherin house...* He thought to himself, smiling. Aside from being the closest thing to a family he and AJ had ever had, it also gave them the overwhelming feeling of belonging.

Though to the other houses, Slytherins were the nastiest students in Hogwarts, the Slytherins are very tight towards each other. It was something you couldn't experience unless you were a Slytherin yourself.

"Hey, here's another one. I think they change once in awhile." Draco said, showing Harry his badge.

***"Harry Potter, the PRIDE of SLYTHERIN."***

Harry laughed, shaking his head. "You freaks are all too much." He said, smirking. He looked around and saw the others wearing the pins as well, flashing them proudly to any other students of different houses passing by.

"Yeah... You have nothing to be proud of anyway. In fact, you should be ashamed of your so-called *champion*. It's not as if he became a champion *fairly*. He forced his way in. He doesn't *belong* there." Ron spat out bitterly, a tone of jealousy in his voice.

"Yeah, he's way too young anyway and I'm betting he'll be utterly creamed and humiliated by the other champions five minutes into the tournament." Seamus added as a matter-of-factly, causing some of the other Gryffindors to chuckle in agreement.

"Don't have to be jealous, Ronnie-boy. Maybe if you're good enough, I'll give you the prize money when I win. I'm guessing you're in serious need of it anyway." Harry taunted, causing the Slytherins to howl with laughter and Ron to lunge dangerously at him but Seamus held him back, not wanting Snape to catch them attacking one of his favorite students.

"Oh I forgot, Harry. These badges do something else, too." Blaise said as he pushed his badge against his chest, causing the original message to vanish and another one to replace it.

***"Diggory Stinks."***

Harry burst out laughing, but Draco held a hand up, sneering evilly at Ron, who was watching the Slytherins with an envious scowl on his face.

"That's nothing, Harry. Here's my favorite one, courtesy of yours truly." Draco said, still sneering as he pushed his own badge against his chest, making another message appear.

***"Weasley for Waterboy."***

This time, all the Slytherins except AJ cracked up, laughing as Ron wrenched himself away from Seamus grasp and attempt to attack them but Crabbe and Goyle immediately stopped him before he could punch Harry or Draco.

“Oh yeah, really funny. Really *witty*. So mature...” Hermione said in disgust as she watched Pansy, Lila and Millicent giggle hysterically.

Her eyes met AJ’s for a minute who was the only Slytherin who wasn’t laughing but instead, looking guilty, turning her face away from Hermione’s to hide the concern in her expressive eyes.

However, she didn’t get the chance to react when Draco sneered at her, offering a badge to her as he winked at Harry knowingly.

“Want one, Granger?”

Hermione just stared coldly back at him.

Draco smirked at Harry before turning back to Hermione, a mocking grin on his face. “Aw come on, Granger. I know you want to show your support for *Harry* too. Just don’t touch my hand now. I just had it washed and I don’t want a mudblood sliming it up.” He mocked.

“Malfoy...” Harry warned dangerously, shocking both Draco *and* Hermione.

Before Draco could show his surprise at Harry’s reaction, Ron pulled out his wand and pointed it at Draco, scowling at him angrily. The Gryffindors gasped while the Slytherins all fell silent glaring threateningly at Ron, all of them watching as Draco pulled out his own wand, his eyes glinting malevolently.

“Go on then, Weasley. Moody’s not here to protect you now.” Draco threatened, pointing his own wand at the other boy. There was a tense silence as the two locked hateful glares before they both yelled out something at the same time, all the other students watching them in anticipation.

“*Furnunculus!*” Ron cried out.

“*Densaugeo!*” Draco yelled.

Both spells collided at the same time, ricocheting off in another direction as Ron’s spell hit Blaise, and Draco’s spell hit Hermione. Blaise gasped and covered his face with his hands while Hermione whimpered in panic, covering her mouth.

“Hermione!” Ron and Seamus both exclaimed in concern, rushing to her side just as Harry glared at Draco in anger, his emerald eyes narrowing into dangerous slits.

Draco gave him an innocent smile. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t like her new look?” Draco mocked, pointing to Hermione, whose front teeth were now growing at an alarmingly fast rate, making her eyes widen in alarm again.

“Malfoy, you were supposed to hit Weasley, not Granger!” Harry hissed furiously at him so that only the two of them could hear.

“So what? A Gryffindor is a Gryffindor and besides, why are defending her again, Harry? This bet of ours is sort of making you develop a soft spot for the mudblood isn’t it? Watch yourself Harry, I’m only reminding you keep a firm grip on yourself when you’re with her.” Draco warned.

“That’s not what I meant, Draco! Only *I’m* allowed to mess with Granger like that! Why did you—”

“What is going on here? What has happened?” Snape demanded, looking at his students sternly.

When everyone all started to give their own view on what happened, Snape pointed a finger at Draco.

“Explain.”

“Weasley attacked me, sir—”

“We hit each other at the same time!” Ron shouted.



“And he hit Blaise! Look!” He said, pointing to Blaise. Snape nodded at AJ, who rushed to her best friend’s side and whispered a counter spell, removing the warts immediately.

“Well Malfoy got Hermione!!” Seamus protested. He forced Hermione to show them her teeth, causing the Slytherins, particularly Pansy and the girls to burst out into laughter again, clearly amused at the sight.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, a sneer forming on his face. “I see no difference.” He said simply. Hermione’s eyes widened and filled slightly with tears as she turned and bolted off, disappearing out of sight.

Harry bit his lip from saying something against his head of house but it took all his willpower to stay where he was and to keep himself from chasing after Hermione, not wanting to make a scene in front of his other housemates.

*Why do I even want to go after her? She’s probably bawling her eyes out anyway. I couldn’t comfort her if I tried.* Harry reasoned, rolling his eyes to himself for assurance.

However, he just couldn’t explain it but he suddenly felt a sudden, strong responsibility to go after her and comfort her... He really couldn’t explain what that was... He didn’t want to find out either. Frankly, the thought of having it answered scared the hell out of him.

Seamus and Ron began shouting at Snape at the same time and though Harry hid his uncertainty with his sneer, he found a crazy urge to join their shouting.

Shocked at his own stupid thought, he shook his head and grinned maliciously when Snape took fifty points from their house, giving both Ron and Seamus detention before he led them all inside the room, the Gryffindors all scowling darkly behind him.

Draco took that particular moment to flash “***Weasley for Waterboy***” at Ron, sniggering when Ron visibly tensed and flushed in humiliation. AJ, who had passed Draco as he did this, scowled at him and gave

him a warning glare, causing Draco to grumble something in response, rolling his eyes.

Just as Harry was about to tell Draco to cut it out as well, they all heard the door open, making them all turn to see Colin Creevey, a Gryffindor third year, looking slightly nervous at interrupting Snape's class.

"Yes?" Snape asked curtly.

"Sir, I'm supposed to take Harry upstairs. All the champions are going to have their pictorials today." Colin squeaked timidly.

"Mr. Potter is one of the top students in my class so I will not be excusing him for a ...*pictorial*. He will come upstairs when he is ready." Snape answered coolly, keeping the expression on his face neutral.

Colin went pink. "Uhm, Sir, Mr. Bagman says all the champions are to come right now."

Snape sighed, turning to Harry, raising an eyebrow questioningly at him. Harry just shrugged at him, obviously leaving the decision up to him. "Very well. Harry, I trust that you are responsible enough to get the notes and assignments of whatever you will miss from your housemates and that you will be prepared, *as always*, next meeting." Snape said.

"Of course, sir." Harry answered, gathering his things before nodding at Snape, heading for the door. Just as he was about to walk out, he saw Draco flash him "***Harry Potter, the PRIDE of SLYTHERIN***" again, making him grin and nod at him, walking out of the room.

**A/N:** Harry's finally dumped Parvati! Yay! Hehe... Oh and thanks to everyone who emailed me- you know who you are! I really appreciate it and also thanks to those who put me as their fav author! I love you all so much! MWAH! **PLEASE REVIEW!! Ciao!**

## Chapter 13- Tears of Emerald

"It's amazing isn't it, Harry?" Colin Creevey asked excitedly as he scampered after Harry in the empty corridor after they had left the Potions classroom, Harry taking long, confident strides ahead of him.

Harry didn't bother answering the boy as the Slytherin walked on, cursing under his breath in irritation. *I can't believe this little windbag is actually having the courage to talk to 'me'...* He thought hotly.

"You being the champion and all that... I mean, I could never have the courage to do that, even though I'm in Gryffindor and all but I just can't help but congratulate you." Colin gushed on, talking endlessly as they rounded the corner.

*Doesn't this boy ever shut up??* Harry thought irritably, raking a hand through his hair as Colin rattled on and on in a continuous sentence, not bothering to pause for breath.

"It's going to be great you know, you and Cedric being champions since I'm pretty sure Hogwarts will have a sure win now but although, I'm also a little bit worried about Viktor Krum though I don't think he has a chance against the two of you but you never know right? He just might and—"

Harry growled and stopped abruptly, whirling around and grabbing a fistful of Colin's robes, lifting the smaller boy off the ground threateningly. The Slytherin snarled at him, intimidating him with his height as he grasped Colin's robes tighter and held him higher, his emerald-green eyes flashing.

"*Look, Creevey! I—*" Harry stopped himself from exploding out loud as closed his eyes in an attempt to calm himself down and took a deep breath before he opened his eyes again and sneered at Colin.

"Frankly, I don't give a damn what you think and if you could just... Maybe *shut up*, I would gladly appreciate it." Harry said very slowly and very clearly, glaring at Colin in such a way that made the smaller boy's eyes go wide with fear.

“S-Sure... Harry! Hehe... Whatever you say...” Colin squeaked, a nervous, scared smile on his face.

Harry narrowed his eyes but nodded slowly, dropping the boy roughly to the ground before dusting himself and walking on, his robes swishing behind him. Colin let out a nervous breath before he stood up shakily and hurried after the raven-haired Slytherin, making sure he was walking five steps behind him in case Harry ever felt the need to manhandle him again.

As they headed up the stairs, Harry calmly spoke up, not even bothering to look at the Gryffindor in the eye. “Let’s get one thing straight, Creevey. Never call me ‘*Harry*’ again. I really don’t like hearing my name coming out of the mouth of a pathetic shrimp like you...” Harry said derisively, smirking to himself.

“I-I’m sorry, Har—I mean, Potter... I just thought that well....” Colin tried to formulate a sentence, scratching his head stupidly.

Harry rolled his eyes again and was about to walk into the right room when Colin suddenly squealed and jumped up, a wizard’s camera suddenly grasped tightly in his hand. “Hey!! Harry, can I take a picture of you?! Please?! I promise I’ll shut up right after! Can I, can I, can I?! Oh please I want to show it to all my friends and—”

Colin never got to finish the sentence as Harry walked up to him and shoved him away, causing him to fall down on the floor, his camera still grasped in his hand. Harry smirked and shook his head, walking into the room and leaving Colin there, gaping like an idiot at him, camera still in hand.

As Harry walked into the room, noticing that most of the classroom chairs had been pushed to the very back to leave space in the middle where he saw some wizards from the *Daily Prophet* talking to each other, holding cameras.

In the front of the room, Harry saw that there were several chairs pushed to the board as well which were covered with a long length of velvet. Harry cringed when he saw Ludo Bagman sitting in one of them with a witch wearing Magenta robes. Judging from what Harry saw in the witch’s hand, he guessed she was a reporter.

Hoping they hadn't noticed him yet, Harry headed for the back of the room where he saw Cedric and Fleur chatting casually with each other, Viktor Krum sulking in the corner away from the two of them.

Before Harry could join them, he heard Bagman's voice exclaim loudly behind him and a second later, he was spun around and was facing a large wizard's camera, which had flashed in his face.

"Hey! The hell?! Get that piece of crap away from me!" Harry snapped instantly, shoving the camera away.

Mr. Bagman laughed, clapping Harry affectionately on the back. "Always has a way of words, our Mr. Potter... Indeed, our fourth champion..." He said, grinning down at Harry proudly.

Harry just glared darkly, muttering to himself as the cameras continued to flash at him, making him clench his hands in annoyance.

"Is this going to take long? Cause I have a class with Prof. Snape right now and—"

"Nonsense, Harry! This is just going to be a short wand weighing and a couple of pictorials too!" Bagman boomed, ruffling Harry's hair.

*Who the hell does he think he is messing up the hair like that?!* Harry thought, gritting his teeth as he rudely took a step away from the excited wizard, glaring at him in dislike.

Bagman didn't seem to notice Harry's cold attitude as he beckoned the witch he had been talking to over, grasping Harry by the neck again as he wrapped a proud arm around his shoulders.

Harry tensed and pulled away just as the witch joined them, making Bagman laugh out loud, shaking his head. "What's wrong Harry? Am I cramping your style?" Bagman kidded, laughing.

Harry sneered, snobbishly dusting his robes where Bagman had touched him. "You could say that, Mr. Bagman but it would be more like, no one can touch me unless I allow them to." He retorted.

Bagman pretended not to hear Harry's remark as he introduced the younger boy to the witch in front of him, grinning as the witch's eyes seemed to widen with curiosity. "Harry, this is Ms. Rita Skeeter. She's doing a small coverage of the tournament for the Daily Prophet." Bagman said, as the witch seemed to eye Harry up and down in inspection.

Harry couldn't help smirking to himself. *Does this woman know I'm probably less than half her age?* He asked himself, chuckling. "Hmm... I was wondering if I could have a brief interview with Harry... For a bit more color, of course..." Rita said, her eyes still peering at Harry with her eyes gleaming in bottled excitement.

"Certainly!" Bagman exclaimed. "Of course, if Harry has no objections, that is..."

"But I—"

"Great!" Rita cut in, grabbing Harry tightly by his arm and dragging him out of the room.

"Lady, would you mind taking your disgusting *claws* off me?!" Harry spat out, yanking his arm away from her.

Rita's eyes flashed for a minute before it was gone and she calmly looked at him, taking out a quill and a piece of parchment from her bag. "Why don't we go sit over there, Harry? It might be more comfortable." Rita suggested, gesturing to a broom closet.

Harry merely raised an eyebrow, looking from the broom closet to Rita with a look of disdain on his handsome features.

"I don't think so, lady... If you want to interview me this badly, the best I can do is here." Harry said coolly, settling himself on the rails of the staircase, crossing his arms over his chest arrogantly.

"Fine with me, Harry. Would you mind if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It saves me energy and time." Rita asked briefly, setting the quill and the piece of parchment down in front of him.

"A *What?!?*" Harry asked, his face scrunching with annoyance.

Rita's smile widened, making Harry grimace in disgust and edge away from her as he saw her three gold teeth. She put the tip of the quill in her mouth before setting it upright on the parchment, watching as the quill seemed to glow faintly before resting on the parchment, ready to write.

"Testing, this is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter." She said clearly, making the quill start scribbling down on the parchment rapidly.

***Attractive, blonde Rita Skeeter, forty three, whose savage quill has destroyed—***

"Lovely." Rita said, ripping the parchment off as Harry eyed her suspiciously, his emerald-green eyes glinting with dislike.

Rubbing her hands together, she turned to face him, flashing him her sickeningly sweet smile again. "So.... Harry... How are you and your sister?" She asked, almost innocently as she looked at him expectantly, casually crossing her legs.

Harry glared warily. "Well... AJ and I are just fine, thank you very much. As much as all you people like to believe, we're not as helpless as you want us to be." He answered, carefully choosing his words.

"Hmm.. Lovely, lovely... Yes... What made you decide to join the tournament, Harry? Did your sister want you to join as well?" Rita asked again, her eyes briefly flicking over her quill, which was writing vigorously.

"Well, I don't see why that would be any of your business since—"

"Just answer the question, Harry. Why did you want to join the tournament?" Rita pressured, looking at him sharply.

"No, I didn't. I never wanted to join this damn tournament and I don't know how the hell my name got chosen." Harry answered evenly, glaring at her in defiance.

"Come now, Harry. I know for a fact, you're the type of young man who isn't afraid of getting in trouble so you can just tell me the truth

right now. You've always been known as a rebel anyway." Rita said, grinning slyly.

"But I *didn't* put my name in the goblet. Don't you think I would admit that if I *had?*!" Harry argued furiously.

"How do you feel about the tournament? Excited? Nervous? Confident?" She pushed on, looking at him as though he was a bug under a microscope.

"Well... *Confident* I guess... Since when has a Slytherin ever failed but—"

"Ah, so you believe you being a Slytherin guarantees you to win at everything and anything?" Rita countered, her eyes sparkling.

"No, I never said that... I meant—"

"Do you think things would have been different for you if you had been a Gryffindor?" Rita asked again, interrupting him before he got the chance to finish what he had to say.

"Now, wait a minute, those are rather personal questions and I refuse to answer them to someone like you." Harry retorted irritably, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

"Well then, what would you have you have to say about the death toll of the tournament?" Rita asked, changing the question.

"I heard the tournament was going to be safer this year, anyway and—"

"So you believe you have a chance at winning this thing now that there have been safety precautions and that Dumbledore is giving you his support?" Rita persisted.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but Rita changed the question before he could, cutting him off completely once again. *Does this woman really know the significance of an 'interview'?* He asked himself wryly.



“How do you feel about the other champions? Anyone a threat to you so far?” She asked curiously, peering over her spectacles at him.

Harry couldn't help grinning confidently now as he raked a hand through his raven hair, flashing Rita his well-known heartbreaker smile.

“Well, I wouldn't want to hold any biased statements or anything but I'm not so threatened by the so-called Durmstrang champion as everyone expects. I'm thinking Viktor Krum may not be all he's cracked up to be...” Harry said spitefully, cracking his knuckles for effect.

Rita wasn't looking at him, however... Her eyes were focused on the quill in front of her, which seemed to have written down a lot more than Harry had said. Harry furrowed his eyebrows in confusion and peered down at the quill as well, immediately causing Rita's head to snap back up at him.

“Ignore the quill, Harry. Anyway, do you think your history in the past has led you in one way or another, to believe that you have to prove yourself to the world by entering this tournament? Is it a burden to you?” She asked nosily, pushing her spectacles up her nose.

Harry stood up in anger, looking at her in rage. “Excuse me?! What kind of interview is this?! You're intruding on my personal life, and I refuse to take part in this fucking thing any longer!” Harry yelled, trying to walk off but Rita grabbed his arm again, pulling him back down.

“Watch your language, Mr. Potter... People around the world will be reading this and they most certainly do not want to hear the admired, hero, Harry Potter cursing. Anyway, fine, let me change the question. Do you remember your parents at all?” Rita asked again, unrelenting.

“Of course I don't remember them! In case you haven't read those *fucking* history books correctly, I was a damn infant when they were killed!” Harry shouted at her impatiently.

“How do you think your parents would feel right now, knowing that you entered the tournament?” Rita asked, her gaze unwavering and her voice unrelenting.

“How the bloody hell would I know how they would feel?! And why the hell would I tell someone like you?! It’s none of your damn business, anyway! What is this? Twenty questions?! I’m out of here!” Harry snapped, about to get up but the scribbling quill caught his eye for a moment as he saw his name being written down on the parchment.

***“Even the two ugly, hideous scars—a lightning bolt and a crescent moon—found on the foreheads of the famous Potter twins, are not enough to suppress or to damage the undeniable beauty the twins possess.” Writes Rita Skeeter special correspondent. A gift, perhaps, from their mother, young Harry’s beautiful emerald-green eyes began to water with tears as he tries to recall the parents he doesn’t even remember...***

“I have not got tears in my bloody eyes, you bitch!” Harry snapped, trying to snatch the parchment away but Rita managed to get it first, stuffing it into her bag with a self-satisfied look on her face.

“Ah, well—Dumbledore!” Rita exclaimed in fake enthusiasm, snapping her handbag shut as Dumbledore joined them, his eyes twinkling.

“How are you? I hope you saw my article about you several months back.” Rita said, shaking Dumbledore’s hand with a jovial smile on her face.

Dumbledore couldn’t help smile at the woman. “Yes... I particularly liked the part where I am described as an obsolete dingbat.”

Rita laughed airily, waving it off. “I just wanted to make a point of showing how your ideas seem a little old-fashioned Dumbledore...” She said, flashing him another fake smile.

“I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita but I’m afraid now is not the time since we do indeed have a wand weighing in our hands, here. And from what it looks like, I would think

Mr. Potter is growing rather impatient, now isn't he?" Dumbledore noticed, his eyes looking at Harry in amusement.

Harry nodded, silently thanking Dumbledore for interrupting this god-forsaken interview. "Well, Harry, you can join the other champions now. I believe Mr. Ollivander has arrived." Dumbledore told him, nodding.

More out of relief than excitement, Harry entered the classroom again where he saw the other four judges; Madame Maxime, Karkaroff, Bagman and Mr. Crouch, seated at the front seats.

Harry sat down beside Fleur, flashing the girl a charming smile as he did. Fleur smiled back, showing him her perfect, gleaming white teeth.

"Well, then, let's get started. Ms. Delacour! If you please..." Dumbledore said as he entered the room, seating himself beside Madame Maxime to watch as Fleur stood up and handed her wand over to Mr. Ollivander, who inspected it closely.

"Hmm... nine and a half inches... inflexible...rosewood and containing a.. Oh my.." Mr. Ollivander's eyes widened.

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a veela. It was my grandmuzzers." She explained.

"Yes, yes, I see. I can only recall making one particular wand with a strand of veela hair... Rather difficult to make those kinds of wands so I gave up after making my first. Very delicate wands too, I might add... Easily broken if not handled properly... Though they are indeed very powerful... in fact... If I remember correctly, it was that very wand I sold to your twin sister, Mr. Potter." Mr. Ollivander said, looking at Harry.

Harry just shrugged, twirling his own wand around his hand carelessly. After Mr. Ollivander had inspected Fleur's wand, Cedric stood up and handed Mr. Ollivander his wand, whose eyes twinkled excitedly as he recognized his own creation.

“Ah, this is mine isn’t it? Yes, I remember now. It has a hair from a very fine, particularly rare male unicorn... Nearly horned me when I plucked it out... It’s in very fine condition, though.” He marveled.

“Polished it last night.” Cedric said, grinning.

Harry rolled his eyes, smirking as he took his own wand out of his pocket, which he had also polished and was gleaming beautifully in the light. Krum was next as he stood up and grumpily handed over his wand, sulking with his hands in his pockets as he waited.

“A Gregorovitch creation, if I am not mistaken... Hornbeam and dragon heartstring... Unusually thick... ten and a quarter inches...” Mr. Ollivander said, nodding and handing the wand back to Krum after having done a few simple spells.

Harry stood up and walked over to Mr. Ollivander, handing him his wand. The man’s eyes seemed to gleam in recognition as he inspected the familiar wand in his hand.

“Ah.. Yes.. Mr. Potter... How well I remember *your* wand... If I recall, the Potter family has always had a tradition of picking out the oddest combinations of wands... Your mother, father and sister as well... Hmm... Eleven inches, Holly and Phoenix feather... Very perfect condition indeed. You take care of it regularly?” Mr. Ollivander asked him, handing him back the wand.

“All the bloody time.” Harry smirked, nodding.

After an extremely long photo shoot, Harry finally sighed in relief as he headed off to the Great Hall for dinner, ignoring the adoring looks several Ravenclaw first year girls threw at him as he passed them in the corridors.

Draco eyed him warily as Harry sat down next to him in exhaustion, immediately piling his plate with food. “What took you so long, Harry? You missed the whole of potions.” He said, smirking as he watched his best friend devour the food in front of him in mere seconds.

“Damn photo shoot... Took all bloody afternoon...” Harry grumbled, chewing noisily and flashing his younger housemates a death glare when they all looked at him curiously.

“What the fuck are you all staring at?!” He snapped at them, making them jump in surprise and turn back to whatever they were doing nervously, not daring to look at him again.

Draco sniggered as Harry narrowed his eyes, turning back to his food grumpily. “Damn younger years... Can’t get a life...” He mumbled to himself, taking a long swig of his pumpkin juice just as Blaise and AJ sat down opposite them.

Harry looked up at the sight of his other half but AJ ignored him completely, taking out a thick Arithmancy book and beginning to study silently.

“AJ, don’t you do anything else but study?! I swear, keep it up and you’ll be as dorky as Granger!” Blaise remarked, earning him a laugh from Draco, who was smirking at Harry.

Harry barely heard them, offering a small smile at his twin. “Hey AJ... How was your day?” He asked, looking at her.

“Fine.” She replied curtly, not bothering to look up at him.

Harry cursed to himself but nodded and looked at her again, this time placing his hand over hers in an effort to make her look at him. AJ barely moved at all, not taking her eyes off the book in front of her.

“Hey... AJ... Can we talk?” Harry asked, gently squeezing her hand. Draco and Blaise watched the two of them silently, shifting around in obvious discomfort.

Draco looked at AJ intently, who looked up at him and met his eye briefly for a moment, allowing Draco to see the stubbornness still found in them, refusing to relent.

“I can’t right now. I just remembered I have something really important to do. I wasn’t really hungry anyway.” AJ said abruptly,

yanking her hand away from Harry and gathering her things, stalking off without another word or glance at the three boys.

Harry bit his lip and ran a furious hand through his hair, holding back a wave of frustration that was threatening to overcome him. Draco looked at him for a minute, looking like he was just about to say something when Harry held a hand up, glaring at him icily.

“Not one word, Malfoy. Not one *bloody* word.” He warned, violently slamming his fist against the table in anger.

Draco shrugged, rolling his eyes before looking up to see Parvati walk into the room, flanked by her Gryffindor and Ravenclaw friends around her. He hid a smirk as he noticed them all heading towards their table with a purpose, angry, determined looks on their faces.

Harry didn’t have much time to react as Parvati furiously walked up behind him and knocked his goblet of juice aside, causing it to spill over his pants, drenching Harry completely down his drawers.

Draco and the other Slytherin boys burst out laughing just as Harry stood up abruptly, shocked by the blast of cold. “Woman, just what the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?!” Harry yelled at her, his eyes blazing in anger and humiliation.

Parvati glared back at him defiantly, her friends all flashing Harry haughty glares behind her. “Harry James Potter, you are the biggest asshole I have ever met!” She raged at him, trying to shove him away from her.

Unfortunately, Harry was much stronger than she was so he barely moved at all when she shoved him, just smirking in response. “Well, I don’t see why you’re getting so worked up about this... After all, you were the idiot who spread her legs even before I asked her to!” Harry mocked, sneering at her shocked expression.

“Ooh...Ouch!” The Slytherins chorused, all of them sneering at the Gryffindor girl haughtily. Parvati gasped, her face flushing a deep shade of scarlet as the other girls behind her looked absolutely livid, their jaws hanging open.

Harry just gave her his winning smile, flicking his wand over his pants to dry himself off before he sat back down calmly, turning to Draco, who was just watching the scene with amusement on his handsome features.

"Draco, can you hand me another goblet of pumpkin juice over there? Mine seems to have been misplaced all of a sudden." Harry asked casually, shooting the girls another charming smile.

"Now, do you see how much of a jerk, he is?? I'd have to say I told you so!" Lavender hissed at Parvati, making sure Harry heard each and every word she said.

"Well just because you girls have both made the stupid mistake of being too easy for me, it's no reason to get all worked up." Harry said, shaking his head in mock shame.

"That does it!" Parvati screeched, stamping her foot angrily. Breaking out into an evil smile, she dug her fingers into a slice of cake on the table, sneering as she walked over to Harry and began rubbing the cake onto his face.

Draco's eyes widened in both shock and laughter as all the girls Harry had dumped before cheered loudly, whistling and catcalling for Parvati just as Parvati gingerly wiped her hands on Harry's expensive designer robes, giving the handsome raven-haired boy a sweet smile.

"Chocolate cake... You favorite, *Harrykins...*" She mocked again, flashing him a saucy grin as she flipped her hair over her shoulder, strutting off, her friends still cheering and giggling behind her.

Harry growled as he angrily took out his handkerchief from his robe pocket, taking off his silver-framed glasses as he wiped his face clean, scowling at Draco, who was the only Slytherin laughing.

The other ones were just staring at Harry in shock, too scared to react fearing that Harry might take his rage out on them if they do.

Harry snarled again and he felt his anger intensify as he eyed the Gryffindor table, which were probably the only ones who were brave

enough to have a few students smile or laugh at Harry during the whole accident.

Harry briefly caught Hermione's eye for a moment, feeling a stronger surge of fury engulf him as he saw the laughter and amusement twinkling in the pretty brunette's eyes. *Guess she just got out of the hospital wing after her little 'accident'...* He thought icily, frowning as he stood up, looking at his own expensive robes in disgust.

He saw Ron and Seamus laughing their heads off, pointing at him and slapping each other's back in amusement. *Yeah... Weasley just loves seeing me during moments like these...* Harry thought irritably.

"Hey, Potter! Mail's here." Draco said, still trying to hide a smile behind his hand as he gestured to Hedwig, who had landed on Harry's shoulder, a new letter tied around her.

Harry carefully removed the letter before sitting back down, flinging a metal knife at Draco, who easily caught it with one hand just mere centimeters away from his still smirking face, not even flinching in fear or surprise whatsoever.

"Nice try, Potter." Draco said calmly, carefully placing the knife back down on the table and offering Harry a superior smile. "But never perform a stunt like that to someone who taught it to you in the first place." Draco continued smugly, raising a haughty eyebrow.

"Fuck you, Malfoy." Came the calm, careless reply just as Harry unfolded the letter he got, stroking Hedwig as she helped herself to some on his pumpkin juice. Draco laughed, reading over his shoulder just as Harry began reading the first line in the letter.

*Dear Harry,*

*As usual, I'm thinking this 'misunderstanding' you and AJ have is just a little squabble and the only reason you two have not made up yet is because of both your oversized pride. Talk to your sister, Harry, she may act like she can handle things but she's much younger at mind and at heart than you are. You just have to understand her right now. As for you being in the tournament, I can see a lot of potential in you, Harry. After all, I'm not lying when I say*



*that your mother and father were both very powerful wizards themselves and surely, you and AJ have acquired these characteristics from the both of them. Anyway, the reason I wrote to you is that I want you to set November 22nd as a free day for yourself because I shall be coming to visit you and your sister that day. I have to talk to you face to face about the TriWizard tournament and what's in store for all of you. I have a very bad feeling about all this... Just stay close to Dumbledore and Moody and whatever you do, Harry, keep a close watch on yourself and on AJ... Keep yourselves safe and away from danger... I'm counting on you. Oh, and try not to break any more poor girls' hearts okay? Key word there is 'TRY'.*

*Sirius*

Harry smirked as he put down the letter, shaking his head at his godfather in amusement. Honestly, he tended to act more like a *godmother* at times rather than a *godfather* since he was always worrying about them.

Not that Harry minded of course but still, the advice he would give Harry would sound like something that would come out of a mouth of a female. It was like having a mother and a father at the same time.

Still shaking his head, Harry set the letter down and turned to see Hermione leaving the hall, carrying her usual load of heavy books and parchment in her delicate arms.

*No doubt heading to the library, I'm sure...* Harry thought, smirking. He was about to follow her when he noticed Viktor Krum steadily following after her, pretending to be engrossed in a book he was carrying himself.

For some unknown reason, Harry felt himself clenching his fists very tightly as his handsome face twisted itself into a hideous snarl, glaring daggers at the back of Krum's head.

Draco had to smirk when he saw this, shaking his head at Harry. *If looks could kill...Krum would have been a goner...* He thought, chuckling to himself as Harry snatched a knife from the table and began repeatedly stabbing the table in front of him, his eyes flashing with rage and...*jealousy?!*

*Where the hell is that asshole think he's going?!* Harry thought angrily, ignoring the frightened glances the younger years were throwing at him. Before he knew what he was doing, Harry got up abruptly and began following after them, his hand dangerously clasping his wand tightly in the pocket of his robes.

"Potter, where the hell are you going?" Draco asked him incredulously.

"I'm... I'm just going to take a bloody shower..." Harry lied as he rudely pushed a Hufflepuff out of his way just as he was exiting the hall.

He was just about to head for the library when he stopped, pausing to glance down at his robes, which were still pretty much covered with chocolate cake. *On second thought... Maybe I really 'should' shower first...* He thought, scrunching his face up in disgust of his own filthy state as he headed for the Slytherin dungeons.

"Fuck! Ow! Dammit Draco, watch where you're going!" Harry hissed irritably as he and Draco tripped over a tree root outside Hogwarts a couple of days later, the invisibility cloak they had around them nearly sliding off them completely.

"Well your big foot was in the damn way, Potter! How the hell was I supposed to see it in the bloody dark?!" Draco snapped back, shoving Harry away from him.

"Well if you hadn't been running your big mouth the whole time maybe you would have cared to watch where you were going!" Harry retorted, scowling at him.

"Right... You should be glad I'm even bringing you out here Potter..." Draco said sarcastically, dusting his robes off from dust just as Harry removed the invisibility cloak off them.

"Remind me exactly *why* we are here, Malfoy." Harry regarded irritably, raising an eyebrow at him as they looked around them, seeing the front of Hagrid's hut and a couple of trees from the Forbidden Forest.

“Oh this is the thanks I get for bringing you out here to show you what your first task in the tournament is?! Fuck you, Potter, if I had known you were going to be such an asshole about it, I would’ve—” Draco never forgot to finish his sentence as Harry’s eyes widened.

More out of panic than anything else, Harry threw the invisibility cloak over them, glaring at Draco threateningly to keep him quiet as they saw Hagrid step out of his hut, looking rather excited as he walked over to a clearing in the Forbidden forest, Madame Maxime behind him.

Harry’s eyes widened as he and Draco followed after them, taking in the many different wizards and witches huddled in the clearing. Draco gasped out loud, causing Harry to glare at him and clamp his hand over his mouth to shut him up as they saw four huge dragons in the clearing being tamed by the wizards and witches, who were casting numerous stunning spells to put them to sleep.

“How the hell did you find out about this, Draco?” Harry hissed at him, removing his hand from Draco’s mouth.

Draco smirked arrogantly, shrugging. “Prof. Snape found out about it early from Moody and told me to tell you about it but I figured, why tell you when I could show you? It’ll give me a chance to see the dragons myself.” He reasoned, grinning.

Harry gave him their handshake under their invisibility cloak; watching as they saw a wizard the recognized as Charlie Weasley, stun a large, black dragon in front of them.

“What do the champions have to do, Charlie? Are they gonna fight em?” Hagrid asked, looking admiringly at the dragons as a father would to his newborn baby. Madame Maxime, Prof. Karkaroff, and Prof. Moody grimaced behind him,

“Nah, just get past them I think... Man, I certainly hope they can survive this lot... Especially the Hungarian Horntail... I pity whoever has to face this one.” Charlie said grimly, looking at the black dragon again.

Prof. Moody didn't seem to be listening however, as his magical eye seemed to move over to the side, looking almost in amusement at Harry and Draco under the invisibility cloak as though he could see them under it.

Draco, seeing this, nudged Harry, turning wide, surprised eyes at Moody who smirked back at them, nodding before turning away, a glint of amusement in real eye. *He can see through invisibility cloaks??* Harry thought in amazement, shaking his head.

Before anyone else can suspect them there, Harry dragged Draco back to the castle, suddenly nervous about the first task he had to face. *Dragons?! Hell... I haven't even seen one before until tonight! Let alone, fight one! How the hell am I going to get out of this one?!* Harry thought in fear and dread, walking on in silence back to the Slytherin dungeons.

He barely heard Draco's excited jabbering as they headed for the Slytherin common room, still trying to think of the best way to get himself past a real live dragon. Hell, he didn't even know what spell he would have to use against it since he wasn't really the type to read those long spell books to find out which spells would be useful against certain situations.

That was something AJ would do and she would make sure to teach him about it right after, telling him the basics of the spell. Come to think of it... Most of the counter spells, hexes and curses Harry knew that were useful to him were taught to him by his twin sister, whom, Harry could proudly say, was one of the top students in the year.

*Probably why I like to copy from her so much during examination days...* He thought, smirking. Though she didn't like it, Harry usually found a way to persuade AJ to let him copy off of her exam paper during examination week to get himself a high grade since he was too lazy to study by himself.

*A lot of good that would do him now...* Not only was AJ mad at him but also, he had to think of what spell he would have to use against a *dragon*. Did his schoolbooks have something related to that that he didn't come across?

“Snake Fang.” Draco muttered, snapping Harry out of his thoughts as they entered the common room, finding it empty except for a couple of seventh year students who were drinking in front of the fire.

“Hey Potter, Malfoy...” They greeted, nodding at the popular duo as they entered the room.

Harry and Draco both nodded back in acknowledgement before Draco yawned and began heading up the boys dorms when Harry grabbed his arm. “Hey, Draco... Would you by any chance know a good counter spell against a dragon?” He asked suddenly.

Draco merely raised an eyebrow at him in question.

“I have absolutely no idea how I am going to get passed that dragon in the first task... I’m pretty sure Karkaroff and Madame Maxime already told their students ahead of time...Not so sure about Diggory though... Anyway...How the hell will I come up with something?” Harry asked furiously, looking at him intently.

Draco burst out laughing, shaking his head.

“So that’s what you were thinking about the whole time, Potter? Relax, you’ll figure something out. You always do anyway and you’re going to win, I’m sure of it. Just cool off.” He said, patting Harry lightly on the shoulder before heading on up to the dorms.

Harry cursed under his breath, shaking his head at himself before following after Draco, suddenly dreading the following days to come. Just as Harry closed the door to their dorms, another figure stepped out of the girls’ dorms, wide-eyed and jaw hanging open.

*They’re going to have to face a dragon for the first task?* AJ thought, still wide-eyed with surprise and fear. *I sure hope Harry knows what he’s going to get himself into... If only he wasn’t being such a jerk I would help him but...* AJ thought worriedly, shaking her head to clear the thought away.

*I better tell Cedric... He seems to be the only one who doesn’t know...* She thought, heading out of the common room in a hurry.

"Can you believe this, Hermione?! They actually have an article about Potter in the Daily Prophet!" Ron exclaimed bitterly, slamming the newspaper down on the table Hermione was reading on.

Hermione jumped in surprise, biting back her irritation and annoyance as Ron and Seamus both joined her table in the library, causing most of the students in the room to look sternly at them.

"Ron, shh! This is a library for Merlin's sake! Keep your voice down!" Hermione hissed, putting down her book and glaring at him.

"Well, I can't help it! They're actually giving that Slytherin git publicity when everyone knows he isn't the real Hogwarts champion anyway!" Ron pointed out again, making the seventh year Ravenclaw in the table next to them eye them sharply.

"Ron, shh!! Keep quiet!" Hermione snapped again, sighing as she picked up the newspaper he had thrown on the table.

"Well can *you* believe it, Hermione? They even wrote something about you! Here, check it out." Seamus said as he showed Hermione the article done by Rita Skeeter.

***'You could all say I get my strength from my parents... My twin sister... My friends.. But I guess I would really have to say that I get it from myself... I know that the best way to gain inner strength is by believing in myself which is exactly what I do to build up my courage. I'm not as conceited as everyone thinks I am, though but I do believe in staying true to my morals no matter what.'* Harry explained affectionately.**

Hermione snorted, setting the newspaper down in disgust on the table. "Yeah right... Since when has *Harry Potter* ever said something in an *affectionate* manner? And those words sound like something he wouldn't say if you paid him to... *Morals?* I don't think so..." Hermione mocked, rolling her eyes.

"But you haven't seen the worst of it yet, Mione! Here, look at this." Ron said, showing her another page of the article.

***Based on the rumors heard around the school, Harry Potter seems to have claimed a lot of girls in Hogwarts as more than just mere admirers with his stunningly handsome good looks and charms but amongst these lucky women, however, the only one who seemed to have caught our young hero's eye is none other than intelligent, stunningly pretty Hermione Granger, who, like Harry's twin AJ, is one of the top students in her year.***

***"Harry could never like someone like 'her'! She probably made a love potion or something. She's really smart enough for something like that!" claims Pansy Parkinson, another attractive girl who claims herself as Harry's rightful girlfriend. "I doubt their relationship is going to last... No Slytherin would ever want a 'Gryffindor' muggle-born girlfriend anyway." Says confident, young, handsome Draco Malfoy; Harry's own best friend, who, according to rumors as well, is currently dating the other Potter twin—AJ Potter.***

***"Yeah, I saw those two once by the lake and they really looked like they were really busy with something so I left them alone." Claims Vincent Crabbe, another Slytherin boy in Harry's year.***

Ron slammed his fist down on the table angrily. "Malfoy and AJ Potter?! Who are they kidding?! I can't believe Malfoy would put his crony Crabbe to something as low as this!" He raged, looking furious.

"Shh... Ron calm down, this is no reason to get all worked up about... It's nothing really and it's not as if any of it is true. That Skeeter woman just couldn't find enough information about the TriWizard tournament so she decided to make up these crazy rumors about all of us." Hermione reasoned.

"But still!! These are ridiculous situations!! AJ Potter and Malfoy?! You and *Potter*?! Are you sure you don't have anything to tell us Hermione?" Seamus asked, lowering his voice as Madame Pince, the librarian, passed them.

Hermione blushed red, looking away from her two best friends hastily hoping they couldn't see the red in her cheeks. "Of course not! Are you two crazy? I wouldn't go out with Potter if he was the last guy in the world! I have no idea how they came up with all that rubbish!"

Hermione lied, feeling as though someone had slapped the word “fraud” on her forehead.

“Rubbish is right... Potter and *Malfoy*?!” Ron shuddered in disgust, his face twisting with anger as he crumpled the newspaper up in his hand into a tight ball, scowling with anger.

Seamus couldn't help smirking at him, shaking his head. “Seems to me you're more shocked about that pairing rather than our best friend being paired up with our worst enemy.” He pointed out in amusement.

Ron's ears turned red as he muttered something under his breath, looking away from them as Seamus and Hermione both laughed lightly.

“Don't worry about it, Ron. It's nothing... They're all ridiculous lies anyway.” Hermione assured him, flicking her wand over the newspaper, making it burn instantly and disappear into thin air.

“Yeah, we shouldn't let them get to us, mate. Those nasty Slytherins probably made all those things up just to spite us.” Seamus agreed, patting Ron lightly at the back. Ron nodded and was about to say something when a dark scowl formed on his face again when he saw who had just entered the library.

Hermione turned to see Harry enter the library and head straight for the bookshelves, obviously looking for something as a horde of giggly girls soon followed after him, taking a nearby seat to watch him from where he was.

She could feel Ron tensing beside her as Harry eyed the books one by one, not noticing the three Gryffindors glaring at him from where they were seated. Frowning, Hermione noticed for once, that there were dark circles under Harry's eyes and that he looked as though he needed a couple more hours of sleep since his normally perfectly styled hair was disheveled and his robes were messily put on.

*I wonder what's wrong with him...He doesn't look too confident or arrogant now...* Hermione thought as she watched him pull out a thick book about Dragons and inspect it intently, reading silently.



*Probably looking for something to help him with the first task...* She thought, remembering what she had heard from Pansy and her giggly group of friends earlier.

Finally realizing she was staring, Hermione blushed and turned away to look at her best friends, who were now throwing suspicious glances over at Viktor Krum, who was several tables away from them.

“Hey, Hermione, since when did *Viktor Krum* hang out in the library?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

“I don’t know... You would think that jock would be out doing physical exercise but he’s actually studying in here... Who knew he had a good head on his shoulders?” Hermione said, shrugging.

“That dundering *bastard* doesn’t have anything on his shoulders except for a huge, hollow rock.” A snide, drawling voice said from behind them, causing the Gryffindor trio to turn around and see Harry walk up to their table, placing both his hands firmly on the desk.

Hermione thought she saw Krum scowl at them for a minute before she shook her head, flashing Harry one of her meanest glares, which, unfortunately for her, seemed to amuse the Slytherin even more.

“What are you doing here, Potter? Shouldn’t you be joining your giggly fan club over there? I’m sure they’d love to entertain your ego.” Hermione snapped, gesturing to the group of girls at the next table who were all throwing jealous looks of hatred at Hermione, the Harry’s badge proudly on their robes.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want another scene like what happened in the great Hall a couple of days ago.” Ron taunted, making both Seamus and Hermione hide smiles behind their hands.

Harry just gave them a wry smile, shrugging casually before plopping himself down on the chair next to her, much to Ron and Seamus’ dismay.

“Hey, who said you could join us, Potter?” Ron said coldly, glaring at him in absolute loathing.

“Hey, I thought I had the right to sit next to my *girlfriend*, every once in a while.” Harry mocked, smirking at Hermione’s look of horror.

“You *wish*, Potter! Now get away from me, I have a lot more work to do!” Hermione snapped, shoving him away. Harry just laughed, sneering again before getting up and abruptly leaving the library, the book he had taken out tucked firmly in his hands.

Hermione watched him go and felt a surge of irritation as the giggly girls began following after him again, whispering and gushing to each other as they exited the library after him.

Narrowing her eyes, she suddenly had the strange initiative to go after him, wanting to follow him to wherever he was heading. *I wonder what that book was for...* She thought suspiciously, gathering her things.

“Hermione, where are you going?” Seamus asked her curiously as she got up and gathered her things, her eyes trained on the door.

“I... I just remembered I have to finish my Transfigurations essay. I’ll just meet you guys later, okay? I suddenly lost my appetite for dinner...” She said, hastily making her way out of the library after Harry.

“But that was given two days ago! You would have done it by then!” Ron pointed out to her retreating back. Hermione barely heard him, walking on out of the library.

Ron shrugged; scratching his head before he cringed as Madame Pince eyed him sternly, putting a finger to her mouth to indicate silence.

*I wonder where the prat is heading off to this time...* Hermione thought as she followed Harry down to the Slytherin dungeons, ducking behind a wall just in time as Harry glanced back towards her, looking around suspiciously.

The moment she had walked out of the library, she hid herself behind a wall just in time to see Harry tell his fan club off, not wanting them to follow him around the whole school like a pack of lovesick puppies.

Hermione had silently trailed after him since then, hiding once in a while when Harry would turn a corner or glance around suspiciously to make sure no one was following him.

She watched as Harry entered a room, shutting the door behind him just as Hermione heard several other voices in the room, all speaking at the same time. Curious and wide-eyed, Hermione pressed her ear against the door to hear what they were saying inside.

"Pansy, what the hell did you think you were doing spreading those rumors about us?! Did you have any idea how much you could have ruined our reputation?!" She heard Harry's angry voice shout inside, echoing through the silent corridors.

"But Harry, I swear, those were *not* my exact words! That Skeeter woman twisted the words right out of my mouth! I—"

"Still, you should have never agreed to give that bitch a word in the first place.. And Draco, what's all this about you and my sister dating?!" Harry demanded angrily just as Hermione heard a loud crash inside.

"Hey, Potter, I never said anything like that! All I did was agree when Rita asked me if AJ and I were pretty close, how was I supposed to know she meant *close*?" Draco retorted.

"Well you should have thought about it more, you idiot... You had better be sure it isn't true because if it is—"

"What?! Are you threatening me, Potter? You should know by know that you can't get me with that intimidation shit. I *know* what I said, alright?! Who are you going to trust anyway? Me or that bitch?" Draco replied angrily.

"Well what was it that Crabbe said about you and my sister at the lake—"

"Oh come now, Potter, you wouldn't actually believe what *Crabbe* would say, right? And besides, you don't have a right to act all high and mighty on me! What's all this shit about Granger being your *girlfriend*?!"

“Malfoy, you know that isn’t true, I have no idea how Skeeter got that—”

“Well see what I mean?” Draco’s snide voice replied just as Hermione heard footsteps heading towards her again.

Not wanting anyone to see her reduced to something as low as eavesdropping, Hermione scrambled behind the corridors just seconds before Harry exited the room, looking more lost than ever as he headed in the direction of the Astronomy tower.

Frowning, he ran a furious hand through his hair. *My god, I cannot believe I am actually spying on Harry give-me-a-comb-and-mirror Potter! What am I getting myself into?!* Hermione thought, furious with herself.

For a minute though, she felt her heart melt as she noticed once again, the little lost boy look in his eyes before he scrunched his face up in a hateful scowl, his cold eyes flashing in anger again as he stormed off.

Hermione sighed, checking her watch. She knew she should be heading off to meet up with Ron and Seamus around this time but somehow, she felt the sudden urge to follow after Harry once again.

She couldn’t really explain why but somehow, she found herself trailing after him, following him up to the Astronomy tower just in time to see him collapse against the wall facing the lake in front of Hogwarts.

*Who would’ve thought Potter was the emotional type of guy who likes to watch the stars at night?* She thought as she saw Harry glance up at the cool, dark sky, an unreadable look on his handsome features.

A light seemed to dawn upon her as though a voice inside her answered her own silent question as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

*I did...*

Harry gazed out the sky, silently watching as the stars seemed to mock him somehow, twinkling in front of him just to show him how pathetic he truly was.

“Stop gazing at me like that, dammit... It’s not as if all this was my fault in the first place!” He whispered to no one in particular, closing his hands into tight, angry fists as he slowly leaned against the wall behind him, taking a deep breath.

*This whole week has been absolute hell...* He thought to himself, thinking about everything that he was facing all at the same time.

Up until now, he still hadn’t found the right spells and curses he would need to face his first task, yet all his housemates were still cheering him on blindly, adding onto the pressure of making sure he wouldn’t humiliate himself in front of all those people.

It was all getting it to him... Pretty soon, he was going to crack with all the pressure it was taking and as much as he wanted to, he could keep it bottled up forever...

Sure, he was the type of guy who could hide his emotions well behind his mask but... The mask was only a temporary shield... Pretty soon it would wear off... Exposing the gentler, much frailer side of Harry that no one else except his twin sister has seen before. It was a side he mostly kept to himself... He didn’t like the idea of other people finding out how he felt... He didn’t like sharing his emotions like that...

*They’re expecting too much of me... I’m only human you know... I’m not the perfect guy everyone perceives me to be...* He thought, tears of frustration and anger welling up in his beautiful emerald-green eyes.

Furious with himself for his own faults, he stood up abruptly and faced the dark, silently mocking sky, his eyes blazing with dangerous daggers of anger mingled with anxiety.

“Did you hear that?! I’m not bloody perfect!! I’m only human, dammit!!” He yelled out loudly into the dark night before finally surrendering himself to his emotions as he collapsed against the wall again, crying softly as he sank down to his feet, curling himself up.

*Am I not allowed to have fears anymore? To have my own problems and to experience pain? I can't win all the bloody damn time like they expect me to...* He asked silently, tears now freely streaming down his face.

"I'm bound to lose sometime too..." He whispered to himself as he stared off into the sky again, not noticing the figure that had come up behind him.

"Potter?"

Harry looked up almost instantly, his wand in his shaking hand as he pointed it in the direction of the person in front of him, his eyes blazing with anger and humiliation.

"The fuck are you doing here Granger?!" He snapped almost instantly, anger and absolute horror evident on his face as he tried to hastily wipe his tears away.

Hermione looked at him silently with a gentle look on her delicate features, carefully pushing the wand held tightly in his hand down. "Potter... Are you... okay?" She asked quietly, taking a seat beside him as Harry flinched away from her; the cold, emotionless mask returning to his face as he angrily wiped his tears away.

"I'm fine, Granger. I didn't ask you to join me, you know." He replied coldly, not wanting her to see his swollen eyes as he faced away from her, scowling at himself for letting her see him crying like a child.

Hermione sighed, setting a gentle hand on his firm shoulder. "I know that... *Harry*... But maybe you might want to talk about it... It helps you know..." She said gently, removing her hand immediately when Harry had jerked himself away, not meeting her gaze.

"What the fuck do you care, Granger?! You don't need to see me like this, though I'll bet you'd thrive at the opportunity of seeing perfect Potter all weak and pathetic, crying like some sorry-assed Hufflepuff!" He snapped, moving away from her.

Hermione just stared back at him, not even flinching at the harshness of his words. "I didn't come here to gloat, you know Potter... I just

came to help you out, though it was against my principles to help someone like you... I never thought I'd see you crying like this..." She said pointedly.

Harry gave a bitter laugh, sneering at her mockingly. "Crying? I wasn't *crying* Granger! You should know better than to assume things about me, I've already warned you about that before!" He spat out, scowling at her.

Hermione merely raised an eyebrow at him. "You just said you *were* crying, about a minute ago, Harry... I'd take it you're really confused right now..." She said, looking at him.

"Look Granger, I don't need help, alright? Especially from a pathetic Gryffindor like you! I can take care of myself just fine like I've been doing it perfectly for the past fourteen years anyway!" Harry retorted, getting up and tensely walking up away from her.

Hermione sighed again and shook her head, watching as Harry settled himself on the balcony of the tower, looking out into the sky again, ignoring her as she watched him with concerned eyes.

*I guess his pride is still keeping him from opening himself up to anyone right now...* She thought as she stood up slowly and walked up behind him, not saying a word as she just watched him, waiting for him to speak first.

Harry seemed to sigh in frustration, running a hand through his disheveled hair before turning to her in annoyance, a scowl on his handsome features once again. "Granger, didn't I tell you to leave me alone?! Can't you take a hint? I. Want. To. Be. *Alone*." Harry said, pronouncing each word carefully as he glared at her, expecting her to leave.

Hermione just calmly looked back at him, shaking her head silently. "You forgot one thing, Potter... *Gryffindors* are also very curious... And... They can tend to be the best person to seek for comfort when you want to open up... It's something you *Slytherins* will never have." She said softly.

Harry didn't respond to this as he leaned both his hands on the balcony railing, just gazing out at the stars again, his tense form slightly relaxing. After a long moment of silence, he finally spoke up again, keeping his eyes trained on the stars.

"They're... They're so beautiful aren't they?" He asked softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hermione blinked in surprise at Harry asking her such an unbecoming question but she let a small smile grace her lips as she walked up beside him, looking up at the stars as well. "Yes... They are... Almost as if... They had always been beautiful... Perfect and untainted..." Hermione agreed admiringly, taking in a deep breath of fresh air.

Harry's eyes began to fill again as he stared up at them, his eyes flashing with slight bitterness. "Granger... What is it that everyone thinks about me?" Harry asked, finally turning around so he can face her, giving Hermione a clear look at his features.

Hermione squelched a small gasp that was threatening to escape her mouth as she saw him. She was surprised to see that his emerald-green eyes were actually sparkling with slight anxiety and fear, not at all like the cold, blank emerald orbs she had seen in him before.

They were actually unguarded now... Expressive and... There was no other word for it... *Beautiful...Just plain beautiful...*

It was completely enthralling as Hermione found herself staring at them in admiration, enchanted by its beauty and its innocence... *Innocence??* She thought incredulously, shaking her head to clear the ridiculous thought away.

Harry was anything *but* innocent... She couldn't believe she had actually thought about him that way... *Merlin knows just exactly how many girls he had enchanted with those beautiful eyes just to get him what he wants...* She thought.

*But...His eyes are just so... So tantalizing somehow... It actually makes him look so sweet and charming... Like he actually...cares...*



She thought as she gazed at them again, now seeing exactly how much more alike he and AJ actually are.

“Hermione?”

Hermione blinked again, looking at him in shock at being addressed by her first name but she didn't have much time to react as Harry stepped closer to her, his eyes expressing the angst he was feeling at the moment.

“H-how... Does everyone see me?” He asked again, this time looking at her in a much more serious expression. Hermione couldn't help snorting derisively, giving him a lopsided grin as she began ticking off the reasons one by one on her fingers.

“Well let's see, how *does* everyone see the great, handsome Harry Potter? Well, there's always arrogant, aggressive, foul-mouthed, rude, conceited, self-centered, obnoxious, insensitive, egotistical, snobbish—”

Harry grabbed both her hands, his eyes now flashing with anger again as he sneered at her in vain, clearly pissed off. “I get the picture, *mudblood*.” He snapped coldly, narrowing his eyes in anger.

Hermione actually smirked at him, yanking her hands away. “*Good*. Cause frankly, I've wanted to say that out loud for weeks now but I never got the chance, though thanks for letting me get it out of my system.” She said sarcastically.

Harry glared coldly at her for a minute before he sighed and turned away, shaking his head. “Granger... *Hermione*...Why do you hate me so much?” He asked gently, clasping his hands together as he waited for the answer.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, taken back.

“You know why, Potter. You and Malfoy had done nothing else these last few years except to make our lives a living hell... And you were both actually proud of yourselves for doing so. You're a jerk to everyone else you meet and your respect for women is absolutely

disgusting! You think you could get any girl you wanted to sleep with you!" She stated.

"Why did we ever become enemies again?" Harry asked, his tone of voice almost sad as he listened intently to what she was saying.

"*Because*, you chose Malfoy's hand of friendship that day on the train! Remember? You rejected Ron friendship and you rejected mine! You and your sister treated us like we were completely worthless!" Hermione retorted.

"Do you wish sometimes that I had taken *your* friendship?" Harry asked her softly.

Hermione froze, clearly surprised by the question and not knowing what to say in response. "... Sometimes I guess... But did you ever have any regrets about taking Draco's friendship?" She asked in return.

"No... Granger. I never regret my decisions. I never regret what I chose to happen in my life because I like how it is right now. Draco and Slytherin house has given me so much I can be thankful for... They helped me develop into the person I truly was." Harry answered.

"A cruel, heartless jerk?" Hermione mocked.

Harry could help but manage a weak smile. "If that's how the rest of the world sees me then yes... *a cruel heartless jerk*. But also my self-esteem, my strength, power, popularity... and my belief in myself... That's what I'm completely thankful for..." Harry said, sighing again.

"You don't sound too happy about it right now though... May I ask, Potter, why exactly were you crying when I found you?" Hermione asked him, peering at him closely to see the frailty in his eyes once again.

"Because... I... Oh, it's none of your fucking business, Granger!" Harry snapped suddenly again, a growl on his face as he yanked himself away from her.

Hermione let out a breath of frustration. "Potter, what the hell is wrong with you?! I don't understand you at all! You're open to me the first minute then completely cold the next! And you keep alternating between my last name and my first name, will you make up your mind?!" She asked impatiently.

Harry smirked at her, looking slightly amused. "As soon as you make up yours about calling me *Harry* or *Potter*." He retorted, making Hermione smile in spite of herself, shaking her head.

"Fine, *Potter*. Let's get one thing straight, do you want to talk or not, because if you don't, then I'm leaving right here and now." Hermione said, making a move towards the door but Harry bolted up and grabbed her arm, making her whirl back and see the desperately lost look in his eyes.

"Don't.... I... Fine, *Granger*, I... Don't want you to go..." He whispered, letting his eyes drop to the floor almost nervously as he whirled around, leaning himself against the same wall Hermione had found him.

Hermione's facial features softened as she eyed him curling himself into a fetal position against the wall, resting his forehead on his knees in an act of exhaustion and helplessness.

She sighed and plopped herself down next to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. Harry flinched when she had touched him but relaxed right after, lifting his head up to face the girl in front of him as tears cascaded down his face.

"Granger... Do you... Do you remember that fateful day four years ago.... When..." His voice trailed off but he looked at her expectantly, as though awaiting her answer.

Hermione looked at him in confusion for a minute, almost losing herself in his eyes again before she shook her head and thought about what he had asked *Four years ago... I haven't met him yet four years ago... Oh, unless he was talking about the time when...* Hermione slowly, nodded, remembering exactly how she had come to meet Harry and AJ potter for the first time in her life.

Her parents had taken her to the zoo as part of a family vacation they had wanted to have and unknowingly, as much as she was ashamed to admit her ignorance, she had failed to notice that the two sweet, friendly twins she had met in the reptile house were actually the famous Harry and AJ Potter, the kids who would soon be her future tormentors in the future.

Harry had seemed so nice and friendly then... Still immature, yes but he was much more welcoming then than he was now... Hermione had even had the ridiculous idea that they might even get to be friends. How wrong she was...

Still... there had been something about Harry's eyes that Hermione had just found so alluring before... She still felt it even until now, though not as often since his eyes would always be as cold as a block of ice, not at all willing to let people see what's behind.

It was something she never failed to notice, yet she was surprised that many of the past girls Harry had been before had never noticed it in him... *Were they really that dense?* Hermione thought in disdain.

She was snapped out of her thoughts, however, when Harry's voice spoke again, filled with such emotion and gentleness that Hermione's eyes had widened at the rare occurrence.

"I was so.... Young and innocent at that time... Hell, I didn't even have an idea who I truly was... Can you believe I didn't even have a clue that I was this hero of this other world at that time? I had not one *fucking* idea that a madman *dark wizard* was out to destroy me and my sister?" Harry said bitterly, as he angrily wiped his tears away, scowling.

Hermione nodded wordlessly, just allowing him to continue.

"Imagine how *you* would feel if one day, a person would just claim to know your name and your history and tell you the parents you thought had died in an accident were actually murdered by the person who gave us these fucking scars?" Harry whispered, his eyes flashing.

Hermione didn't or rather *couldn't* say anything. She just squeezed his shoulder gently as a comforting gesture as he continued, burying his head in his hands again.

"I wanted so much to kill Voldemort that day... Yes, even when I was only eleven years old, I wanted so much to get my hands on my first wand and mutter the first spell that came into my mind... The spell he used to kill our parents, though I didn't actually know what it was..." Harry said, his voice slightly muffled by his hands.

Hermione cringed at hearing Voldemort's name out loud but didn't react when Harry lifted his face up again, looking at her.

"That was why I wanted to be a Slytherin... I was power-hungry.... I was determined... And bloody hell, I had every right to feel burning anger and hatred within myself so the sorting hat easily chose me as a candidate for the right house... And how I wanted *power*... I wanted strength and recognition. I wanted to be the kind of person other wizards would have felt afraid and intimidated when in their presence.. I wanted it so badly... And I got it..." Harry said, smiling grimly.

"We could have actually been friends you know, Granger... After we first met... We could've..." Harry said, offering her a wry smile in comfort.

"If you hadn't been such a jerk in school, then maybe, yeah, we could have had a chance." Hermione said sullenly, looking away.

Harry let out a weak, bitter laugh, shaking his head. "I loved my reputation too much, Granger... I loved the power... The fear... The strong, loyal friends... I still do... I couldn't give it up when I didn't have much control over it yet... I couldn't handle that..." He said, looking away as well.

"Yeah, well contrary to what you believe there are actually better things rather than being the most popular guy at school." Hermione said resentfully.

"Is there?" Harry asked, a small amount of sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Hermione didn't answer him, staring off into space.

"Is that why you hated me?" Harry asked again, looking intently at her.

"Har—Potter, I... I never hated you. I just didn't like the fact that you were always so rude to my friends and to... To *me*." She said, sighing heavily, looking away.

Harry just quirked his lips into a small, accepting smile, another tear slowly making its way down his pale cheek.

"Oh Merlin, Potter, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to—"

Harry couldn't help smirking at her as he wiped the tear away, giving her a small but playful growl. "You tell anyone about this and you're dead, Granger." He threatened in mock anger.

Hermione gave him a small smile, shaking her head. "I won't, Potter, I promise..." She said comfortingly.

"I'm surprised you can be so civil to me after what happened all these years..." Harry said, looking up at the sky again.

"Unlike Slytherins, we *Gryffindors* can actually forgive easily. I've forgiven you a long time ago, Potter." She told him, making him look at her in slight surprise.

Hermione just stared back at him, both of them gazing at each other's eyes for a long period of time before Harry nervously finally broke the contact, a faint tint of pink noticeable on his cheeks.

*Oh Merlin, is Harry Potter actually blushing?* Hermione asked herself in shock. She watched him in disbelief, feeling her own cheeks flush as he almost seemed to give her a shy smile, running a hand repeatedly through his hair in an effort to relax himself.

The two watched the stars again in silence before Harry spoke up again, slowly standing up and walking over to rest his hands on the railings again. "Sometimes Granger... I just... Sometimes I feel as though I got much more than I bargained for..." He said, glaring out at the sky heatedly.

Hermione stood up and stood next to him, though her eyes not on his face but on the beautiful moon above them. "What do you mean by that Potter?" She asked him curiously.

"I mean... I... Everyone expects so much of the so-called Harry Potter... Everyone expects me to win all the bloody time... To always come out on top and to be the same, powerful wizard my father and my mother were... I feel as if..." Harry stopped abruptly, biting his lip as he furiously prevented any more tears from falling.

He didn't want himself to be that weak... He wouldn't let his fear conquer him...

"Go on..." Hermione prodded gently, surprising herself as she reached a hand up and gently stroked his pale, smooth cheek, making Harry step back slightly in discomfort.

"I... I feel as though since I *have* gotten everything I wanted... I have to keep fighting all my life to.. To keep it." He said. Hermione nodded in understanding, her gentle chocolate-brown eyes sparkling with warmth and affection.

"I have to fight for my reputation, for my power and for everything else which is exactly why sometimes... It's almost as if I'm not living my life for myself anymore... Like I'm living it for... For proving myself to them repeatedly... I'm expected to be so bloody perfect all the time." Harry said dejectedly, sighing.

"I never even wanted to join this tournament in the first place but there you go... No doubt one of my damn housemates put my name in that goblet again just because they wanted Slytherin to be recognized... And as of now, they're expecting me to win already like I'm some kind of bloody god or something! Hell, I'm only human; I can't handle everything they want me to!" Harry burst out, violently slamming his fist against the railing.

Hermione jumped in surprise at his sudden act of hostility, taking a step back as Harry took a deep, shaky breath, his fists shaking with suppressed anger.

“And now, I find out my own twin sister is mad at me for something I didn’t do! It’s not like I wanted to join this tournament in the first place! I never wanted to get involved! I can’t believe my own flesh and blood would go against me like this!” Harry yelled out, now openly crying in pent-up frustration as he collapsed weakly against the railing.

Hermione gently wrapped her arm around him but yelped out in surprise when Harry launched himself into her arms, obviously needing comfort as he held her tightly, slightly trembling. *I never thought I’d see the day I would have the great Harry Potter crying helplessly in my arms like a lost little boy...* She thought as she tightened her arms around him.

She couldn’t believe that the trembling form she now held was the relentless enemy that had taunted and tormented her and her friends for the past years.... The same gorgeous guy whom every girl in school wanted and whom everyone else feared... It was almost too hard to believe.

Hermione pulled back slowly to see his face, giving him a small, comforting yet understanding smile. “So I take it the thing that has been bothering you the most is not really the fact that everyone expects too much of you...” She said, looking at him pointedly.

Harry just looked at her blankly in response.

“The fact that your twin sister’s mad at you is the reason you’re breaking down right now... You don’t want to lose her, don’t you? You love your sister that much? More than the reputation...the fame...the power...?” Hermione asked him, looking at him as though the answer was right in front of his face.

Harry scowled at her, annoyed that she was right, but nodded slowly, turning away. “Gryffindors and their damn *feelings*...I hate it when you use that skill in telling others things they’ve been trying not to realize...” He said bitterly.

Hermione gave him a faint smile, shaking her head. “Potter... There’s absolutely nothing wrong in saying sorry first you know... It’s not a matter of who apologizes first... It’s a matter of who is willing to forgive first...” She told him gently.



Harry snorted in amusement at how clichéd her words had sounded but smirked, nodding in spite of himself. "As much as I hate to admit it Granger, I understand why they call you the smartest witch in the whole damn year." He said, rolling his eyes.

Hermione laughed out loud, smiling at him as he turned to smile briefly back, gratitude and surprisingly admiration shining in his eyes.

"I... I guess I owe you one, Granger..." Harry said, dropping his eyes before giving her actually giving her a nervous smile.

Hermione looked annoyed for a minute before she boldly walked up and looked at him defiantly, smirking slightly. "*Harry*, I've just about enough of calling each other by our last names... It sounds like you're mad at me or something!" Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

Harry quirked his lips into a lopsided grin as Hermione sighed in mock exasperation, smiling at him as she offered him her hand.

"What do you say we call a truce? I've had enough of all the fighting... All the petty insults and snide comments... I'm willing to become friends now. Are you?" She asked him, meeting his eyes.

Harry stared at her for a minute, his eyes unreadable as they locked with hers before he finally broke the silence, actually *smiling* as he accepted her and squeezed it gently, giving it a firm shake.

Hermione felt her heart jump up her throat at the sight of his rare smile, feeling her pulse quicken slightly. It was the actual first time had had actually giving her a true, real smile.... Not a smirk or a sneer but... An actual smile... One without anything else except for warmth and affection.... And...

*It was beautiful...*

*He truly does look handsome when he smiles at me like that...* She thought, her knees buckling slightly.

"I'd like that... Very much, *Hermione*..." Harry said softly, still smiling at her. Hermione smiled back, feeling a warm feeling rush up inside her, causing her cheeks to redden slightly, much to her dismay.

“How about we officially start over then?” Harry said playfully, bowing down to her in a ridiculous gesture of respect. Hermione laughed as Harry bent down and kissed her hand gently, looking up to meet her eyes.

“Greetings, fair lady, my name is Harry James Potter. And you are—”

“Hermione Anne Granger, fair sir. Tis’ quite a pleasure.” She played along, curtsying to him as well. They both laughed at each other, grinning as they slowly started walking out of the Astronomy tower, Harry actually feeling lighter than he had in months as he had a smile on his face.

“Harry... Just curious though... Have you figured out something to use against the first task? I heard from... Well.. A very reliable source that you’re to face... dragons...” Hermione said, looking at him as they walked through the empty corridors.

Harry snorted, rolling his eyes to himself. “Unfortunately, that was exactly why I was at the library in the first place.... And no... I don’t have any idea what I’m going to do...” He said, sighing as he ran a hand through his hair.

*Boy, does he love doing that a lot...* Hermione thought in amusement. “Well... I can’t really offer you any help but... The best advice I can give you is that you should... *play to your strengths*... Well, one of them, anyway...” Hermione added, grinning.

“Which strength would that be?” Harry asked curiously.

“Think, Harry.. What exactly are you very good at?” Hermione asked him.

Harry smirked, giving her a playful look. “Need I tell you exactly *what* I am *very* good at?” He asked, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Hermione felt herself turning red in embarrassment as she scowled at him, shaking her head. “No you stupid git, I mean your Quidditch skills!” She snapped, rolling her eyes.

Harry looked at her in confusion. "So what if I'm the best damn seeker and flier this school has to offer? What the hell will that help me with? I can only bring my wand with me anyway, I can't bring my broom!" He retorted.

"Well as I said, that's all I can tell you but I'm pretty sure you could think of spell to get you exactly *what you need...*" Hermione hinted, giving him a small smile as she turned to head for the opposite corridor.

Harry pondered on this for a minute before his eyes widened slightly in realization just as Hermione was about to walk off.

"Well... Good luck Harry... I... I'll be cheering for *you* tomorrow..." She said, giving him another nervous smile but before she could walk off, Harry grabbed her arm again, making her look at him in surprise.

"Hermione, I... Well... I just wanted to.. Uh..." Harry shifted around uncomfortably, looking at his feet as he spoke to her.

*Fuck, what the hell is the matter with me?! I can't even think of a decent sentence, dammit!* He thought, furious with himself as he forced himself to meet Hermione's questioning gaze at him, making him gulp and look down again.

*Stop shaking you stupid idiot... You've done this so many times before...* He told himself as he forced a smile, looking at her. "Well, I was wondering... I uh, Are you... Free on Saturday?" He asked nervously, looking at her eyes as he tried to prevent a blush to creep onto his face.

*Argh, no! Don't you dare blush Potter! Since when have you ever been the one nervous?! She's just a girl!* He told himself, taking a deep breath before he faced her again.

"Saturday... Well, I don't remember having anything planned on Saturday... Why?" Hermione asked him, a hopeful twinkle in her eye.

"I...Uhm, I just wanted to um.. Well since now we have finally called a truce and all that, I was just wondering if you would like to...uh..."

Have dinner with me, on Saturday in Hogsmeade... If you want to, of course..." He said, smiling at her.

Hermione's eyes widened as she stared at him incredulously. "Harry... Are you... Uh, asking me out on a... on a *date*?" She asked him, not daring to believe it.

Harry let out a nervous laugh, more at himself than at anything else. "Well, yeah, I guess you *could* call it a date... It's just dinner though... I thought maybe we could spend some time together... You know, get to know each other a little better since I do have to make up a lot to you after everything I've been pulling..." He said.

Hermione just grinned in agreement, shrugging as she dropped her eyes shyly.

"I'm paying of course, and I thought maybe we could spend the night just walking around Hogsmeade, I hear it's very peaceful there at nighttime. It could be fun..." Harry said, returning the grin.

Hermione looked apprehensive. "Hogsmeade? But how can we get out? The professors wouldn't allow us to get out..." She reminded him.

Harry's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Leave that one up to me... So... How about it?" He asked her.

Hermione seemed to ponder on the question for a moment before shrugging again and flashing him a smile which surprised Harry as his knees slightly weakened at the sight.

He couldn't help noticing just now that her two front teeth, which had been slightly larger before, were now shrunk and normal sized, making her smile seem much more beautiful and alluring than before.

"Sure... Why not..." She said, still smiling at him.

Harry couldn't have wiped the enormous smile off his face if he tried.

*Ugh.. I can't remember such a time when I smiled so much... I feel like my face is going to crack... My face muscles aren't used to*

*smiling, it hurts...I can't believe I'm actually feeling this way.. I actually like smiling at Hermione!* He thought in horror but the smile was still evident on his face.

"Great! I'll pick you up in front of your common room then at 8 when everyone else is eating dinner in the great hall on Saturday. Is that okay?" He asked.

"You'll pick me up? As in pick me up?" Hermione asked him back.

Harry laughed in amusement again. "Yes, pick you up. I'd be happy to, you know." He said, gently taking her hand in his.

Hermione blushed but nodded, feeling her heart pound against her chest as Harry slowly leaned forward, his face just mere inches away from her own.

Then, as though he had been fairly scared to do so, he brushed his lips very gently against hers for a brief second... Almost as though he was afraid her lips would break if he kissed her too hard, before he smiled softly and pulled back, his eyes sparkling.

It was nothing like the forced, aggressive kisses before... It was actually sweet and gentle... It was a kiss Hermione had never expected she would receive from Harry Potter... He had kissed her in such a way that it had almost been like he was in love...

*I never knew he could kiss like that...* She thought blissfully. *And yet... It was the best kiss he had ever given me...* She realized just as Harry leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek this time, pulling back to give her one last smile.

"Thanks for listening, Hermione..." Harry said softly.

Hermione just nodded, holding a hand up to stroke his cheek gently.

"See you Saturday then... I can't wait.... Until then... *Good night Hermione...*" He said, turning to walk down the opposite corridor towards the Slytherin dungeons.

“Good night...*Harry...*” She whispered to herself, touching the cheek he had kissed as he gave her one last glance before rounding a corner.

When she was sure he was gone, Hermione let a full, lovesick smile form on her face as she briefly leaned back against the wall, sighing to herself. “*Harry James Potter...*” She whispered softly, closing her eyes before she sighed again, heading off towards Gryffindor towers.

Harry couldn’t stop smiling as he made his way over to the Slytherin Common Room, frightening the Slytherin first years as he passed them when he didn’t give them their usual hateful scowl.

He was just about to turn up to the boys dorms when he stopped abruptly, pausing to look at the girls’ dorms with a speculative look on his face.

Taking a deep breath, he smirked as he entered the room, flashing Pansy a look of disgust as he eyed her drooling on her pillow, her ladylike snores echoing in the darkness but nowhere near compared to Millicent’s frightening snores, which made Harry cringe in derision.

Making his way over to his sister’s bed, he slowly pulled back the silk curtains to reveal his twin sleeping peacefully on her bed, her raven hair slightly covering the crescent-shaped scar on her forehead.

Harry gently pushed her bangs away to reveal the scar, dropping a feather-light kiss on it before he kneeled down beside the bed, stroking her hair very affectionately. “AJ?” He whispered, squeezing her hand in an effort to wake her up as he watched her sleeping form in the darkness of the room.

He couldn’t help smirking in amusement when AJ turned in her sleep, cursing out loud before burying her head in her pillow, her face scrunched up in an annoyed grimace.

Smiling, he let a hand slowly stroke her hair again, leaning down to give her another peck on the cheek which caused her to relax somewhat and snuggle closer to her pillow, a small smile on her face.

“AJ... I... I know you probably aren't used to hearing this but I'm... I'm *sorry*... But I swear, you... You have to believe me when I say I'm telling you the truth...” Harry whispered to her, knowing she was asleep.

“Anyway, you probably don't hear me but... You *were* the one who told me once that people understand you better when you talk to them while they're asleep... I just thought maybe well...” Harry's voice trailed off as he looked away.

“Would I ever lie to you? I'm sorry... I just... I guess I let my ego take over again... I'm sorry if I hurt you... You were just worried... I should have noticed that sooner...” He said, sighing heavily.

AJ shifted momentarily but her eyes were still shut close as she seemed to edge closer to Harry, unknowingly placing a hand over his.

“I'm sorry I blew off at you... I guess I was just ticked off at that time... All the fucking pressure was getting to me... I guess I'm repeating myself... I'll leave you alone now sis... I... I love you AJ, always remember that...” He whispered again, leaning over to drop a kiss on her hand before making a move to get up but he stopped abruptly when he felt her hand grab his, pulling him back down on the bed.

“I love you too big brother... I'm sorry too...” AJ suddenly whispered back, slowly opening her eyes to reveal two emerald orbs slowly filling with tears as she looked at him with a small smile on her face.

Harry smiled at her as she launched herself at him, hugging him as tight as she could before she laughed at herself and playfully punched him on the arm, mock scowling. “What took you so long jerk-face? I was waiting all bloody night!” She growled, still scowling, which made Harry raise an eyebrow, laughing at her assumption.

“Am I that predictable?” He asked her curiously.

AJ just smirked at him, shrugging slightly. “Only when it comes to your twin sister.” She said, flashing him an affectionate smile.

Harry's face suddenly turned serious as he looked at her intently, scrunching his forehead up in thought. "Do you still think it was me who placed my name in the goblet?" He asked her, frowning.

AJ sobered immediately, shaking her head. "No... Harry... I'm sorry I doubted you before but I actually knew right from the very start that you weren't the one who placed your name in that goblet... I just made that up to cover up the reason I was really mad at you..." She said softly, not meeting his eyes.

Harry looked at her questioningly, watching as she shifted uncomfortably in the darkness. "Why were you mad, then?" He asked her softly.

AJ sighed, running a hand through her tangled mane of hair before turning to face him, her eyes burning with humiliation and regret. "Because... I was... I was *jealous*, Harry..." She said bitterly, closing her eyes in shame.

Harry's eyes widened as he stared at her in disbelief. "*Jealous*? AJ, when has there ever been a reason for you to be jealous of me?" He asked her in mild anger, his eyes flashing.

"I... I know and I'm sorry Harry... I guess I just couldn't stand the fact that it was always you all the time... You were always the best at everything, the *hero*, the *champion*, the *star* that everyone likes while I would always be in your shadow..." She muttered, sighing heavily.

"AJ... You have no idea what you're talking about..." Harry said, shaking his head at her in slight trepidation.

"I know that and I'm sorry, okay?! I was just caught up in the moment of you being the Slytherin champion and everything and everyone giving attention to *you* and everyone noticing *you*, all the time! I was just getting fed up with my own jealousy you know? So I became a selfish bitch and directed all my pent-up anger on you..." She said, now feeling horrible as she turned away from her brother's gaze.

"I understand how that must have felt but—"



"No you don't... I was just being self-centered, okay Harry? I pretended to be mad at you by believing you actually joined the tournament willingly so I could cover up my own foolish pride... But I wasn't really kidding when I was also pissed off at you for putting your neck on the line for this, though.." AJ said, looking at anything else but her twin.

Harry just stared at her silently for a moment before he opened his mouth to speak but AJ had cut him off again before he could manage to say anything out loud.

"I just didn't like the feeling of always being recognized as *Harry's twin* or *Harry's sister*...I just couldn't take it anymore how I'm always being compared to you... I'm sorry Harry..." AJ whispered timidly again, biting her lip as she watched his reaction.

Harry didn't say anything for a minute before he opened his arms up to her, enveloping her in his embrace as she let her tears fall down freely, burying her face in his shoulder.

"Forget about it, AJ... Let's just forget about this whole thing... It was a silly little fight to begin with... I don't even know how the bloody thing started!" Harry said, making AJ laugh despite her tears and pull away from him, slightly smirking.

"Yeah, you're right I guess... Is there by any chance of getting more of those *Harry Potter, SLYTHERIN Champion* badges?" AJ kidded, mirroring the smirk that was on his face as she wiped her eyes hastily.

Harry gave her a self-satisfied grin, shrugging. "That depends... Will you be cheering for me tomorrow on the stands when I conquer my first task out there?" He asked back, raising an eyebrow at her.

AJ sneered at him, pretending to consider the question. "Hmm... Well I don't know Harry... That Cedric's kinda hot..." She teased.

"You are *such* an annoying bitch, AJ."

AJ laughed at his pissed off face, throwing both her arms around him as he scowled darkly at her, narrowing his eyes. "Prat! Of course I'll

be cheering for you! I'll be at the very front of the stands!" She exclaimed, slapping him slightly.

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance but gave her a small smile as he hugged her again, ruffling her hair as he always did.

"Harry?" AJ suddenly asked, looking up at him as he looked at her expectantly, raising his eyebrows. "Good luck tomorrow...Take care of yourself okay?" She said, scowling at him.

Harry smirked proudly, rolling his eyes at her concern. "Don't worry about it... I've got it all figured out... I've gotten some help with it..." He said, his eyes trailing off for a minute before he smiled again, tightening his arms around his sister.

Silence dawned upon them as the two just lay back down on the bed silently, yawning as they snuggled together like they did when they were children. After a long moment of silence, Harry turned to look at his sister again, who was now half-asleep next to him.

"AJ?"

"Hmm?"

Harry flashed her an incredibly annoying, mocking smirk.

"What's this I hear about you and Draco?! Something I should know about?"

Silence.

"Ugh, Harry!!"

**A/N:** I hoped you guys liked seeing the sensitive side of Harry here and YAY! does a happy dance Hermione actually got to see that side of him and they're actually friends now!! To all those wondering, I actually got inspiration for that chapter from **Mandy Moore's song, "Cry" in the movie, A Walk to Remember**. Try listening to it while reading the H/Hr part in this chapter, it helps add to the moment. I guarantee you all that the bad boy side is still there...BWAHAHA! Well hoped you all liked it... Ciao! MWAH! Luvyah! **REVIEW!**

## Chapter 14- To Face a Dragon

*“Mione’... There’s something I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time now...” Harry whispered softly into her ear, tightening his strong arms around her from where he hugged her waist from behind.*

*Hermione blushed, leaning back against his firm chest as she pulled the jacket Harry had wrapped around her tighter around her slender body. “Go on, then Harry...” She replied softly, sighing against him before staring up at the cool, sparkling night sky.*

*Harry just chuckled, planting a gentle kiss on her cheek before he sighed, resting his chin on her slender shoulder seductively. “Mione... I...” His voice trailed off.*

*Hermione’s heart jumped around frantically as she turned around to face him, staring deep into his emerald-green eyes, so full of emotion and love that she wanted to melt on the spot.*

*Harry smiled at her, taking her hand in his before lifting it up to his lips to give it a gentle kiss. “Mione... I...I...” He turned away, his beautiful eyes clouding over in uncertainty.*

*“Yes, Harry? What is it?” Hermione persisted, gently turning his face back to gaze at her own loving gaze as the couple stared at each other in fear and admiration at the same time, their breaths caught in their throats.*

*“Mione... I think I...”*

*Hermione’s eyes sparkled eagerly as she looked at him, almost willingly him silently with her mind to speak the words she had been waiting to hear.*

*“I... Think I...”*

*‘Just say it, Harry!!’ She thought impatiently.*

*“I think I’m having a bad-hair day!!”*

*Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as her face formed itself into a confused grimace directed at Harry's serious face.*

*"WHAT?!"*

Hermione groaned as Parvati impatiently shook her awake the next morning in the girls' dormitories, interrupting her beautiful dream as she began rambling on and on how she had been trying to wake her up for the past fifteen minutes and how her hair was currently in a so-called disarray.

"Great... Thanks a lot Parvati..." Hermione grumbled, snatching her blanket away from the girl in annoyance.

"You're not welcome, Hermione! I've been trying to shake you awake for the past fifteen minutes now and I was actually thinking about pouring cold water on you to get you awake! And you were murmuring in your sleep, did you know that?" Parvati said, sneering at her.

Hermione blushed crimson, avoiding the other girl's eyes.

*Well what the hell am I supposed to say? Something like 'Oh yes Parvati, I was murmuring in my sleep because I was dreaming about your extremely hot ex-boyfriend whom you happen to hate so much now and who also happens to be my best friends' worst enemy.'* Hermione thought sarcastically to herself, shaking her head.

*Yeah, Parvati would just 'love' that!* Hermione scolded herself, rolling her eyes as she forced herself to get up from her four-poster bed, finally noticing Lavender, who was sitting across from her with Parvati, an exasperated look on her face.

"Parv, you can't be serious! How could you still love the guy when he completely humiliated you?!" Lavender shrieked, making Hermione stop abruptly from where she was heading into the girls' bathroom to face them.

Parvati dissolved into loud wails, burying her tears into her pillow as Lavender tried to comfort her, shaking her head in disbelief. "I still love him, Lav! And I'm sure he loves me too! I just can't believe he

would dump me like that! We had something going, we really did!! There had to be a reason!!” Parvati reasoned, hiccupping.

*Yeah, because you’re just a brainless bimbo with nothing between the ears...* Hermione thought bitterly, scowling at her. “Give it up, Parvati. Harry obviously lured you in just as he did his ex-girlfriends so just accept the fact that he never really liked you in the first place.” Hermione told her, surprising herself at how cold she sounded.

Parvati’s eyes flashed dangerously as she glared at Hermione through her wild, tangled mane of hair.

“When have *you* ever called him *Harry*? You’re probably just jealous anyway because though he’s trying to deny it now, you can see that Harry really feels something towards me and you know he’ll never even give *you* a second glance! That article about you and him was obviously just petty gossip, you could never get someone like *him* to like someone like *you*!” Parvati ranted, taking all her frustrations out on Hermione.

Hermione’s jaw dropped open in shock. “What do you mean someone like me? Just what are you trying to tell me Parvati?” Hermione asked suspiciously, narrowing her eyes at the other girl.

Parvati just scowled at her, flipping her hair over her shoulder haughtily as Lavender handed her another Kleenex, glaring at Hermione as well.

“What she means is, Hermione, you have to admit that...Well... To put it in a nice way, *smart, studious* girls like you are not exactly the type of girl that guys are fawning over. Or to put it in another mild way, girls like you are way too serious to be having guys knocking at your front door, if you get the picture.” Lavender said haughtily.

Hermione’s eyes blazed indignantly as she got up on her feet and stared the other girl down in anger. “Hey! I know what you’re saying Lavender and it’s *not* true! I have a lot of guys after me too! I just don’t like to show it off to the entire population of Hogwarts like the two of you!” Hermione countered stiffly.

Lavender and Parvati both giggled to themselves in amusement, throwing Hermione another sneer as she faced the mirror and began to comb her bushy hair, scowling at her own reflection.

*Don't let them get to you...Just ignore them; they aren't worth the trouble anyway...* Hermione told herself, taking a deep breath to prevent her sudden instinct to yank Parvati's precious locks from her precious head.

"Anyway, Lav, before we were so *rudely* interrupted, I have a question for you..." Parvati said, turning her red, puffy eyes from Hermione to her friend beside her.

Lavender looked at Parvati suspiciously, raising a perfectly plucked eyebrow at the girl.

"Do you think if I start dating one of those really hot Beauxbatons boys, Harry will go crazy with jealousy and come crawling back for me to forgive him? Because frankly, I know he couldn't stand it if he saw me with another guy." Parvati said thoughtfully.

Lavender gave a derisive snort, biting back a laugh as she got up and headed for her trunk to get herself a clean bathrobe. "Yeah right, Parv. I'm guessing Harry already has a new stupid girl lined up for the week and he doesn't even remember your name. Give it up, Parv, the guy is obviously *through* with you. Deal with it." Lavender said bluntly.

Parvati made a small frustrated sound at the back of her throat, stamping her foot childishly on the floor to get her friend's attention.

"He did not! And I swear Lavender! I am going to do *everything* in my willpower to get him back! I *will* take back what is mine! He is *mine*, Lav!! No other girl can have him but me and if I see another girl trying to steal him, they'll be sorry they ever messed with me!" Parvati shrieked almost wildly, violently hurling a lamp towards the door.

Hermione's eyes widened as she hastily grabbed her wand and yelled out a spell to make the lamp slow down and settle itself back calmly on the other girl's dresser. *Well then I guess she won't be happy when she finds out that Harry asked 'me' out for this*

*Saturday... Especially since 'I'm' the girl that isn't the type of have guys going after her...* Hermione thought smugly to herself in secret.

"He *will* come crawling back, Lavender... You can be sure about that." Parvati said darkly, her eyes narrowed in dangerous yet determined slits.

"I don't know why you like him so much, Parvati! You would think after that whole Great Hall scene you pulled, everyone assumes you hate him now... The jerk is not worth the trouble anyway. I'm much more interested in Potter's best friend... Now *that's* a hottie..." Lavender said, giggling.

Parvati couldn't help giggling as well. "Malfoy? He's alright I guess but I don't really like blondes that much... He's way too serious and quiet; never know what the guy is thinking about. And plus, that guy is much more of a crabby jerk than Harry is! He's such a snob!" Parvati said in disdain.

"Who cares? At least he's bloody rich! Plus, I love that hot body! I so have to hook up with him some time!" Lavender squealed, turning red from the thought.

"Maybe we can double date sometime once we have both of them wrapped around our fingers!" Parvati giggled, giving Lavender a high five before the two of them flipped their hair over their shoulder.

Hermione felt like her head was going to explode from all the senseless jabbering. "Ugh... I'm going to go take that hot shower now... You two are giving me a headache..." She muttered, rolling her eyes as she grumpily slinked into the bathroom.

*I can't believe Harry actually enjoys dating girls like these in the past!! 'I' could do so much better!* She thought stiffly before she mentally slapped herself, shaking her head vigorously at the ridiculous idea.

Sighing, she faced her reflection in the mirror, grimacing when she noticed the same bushy brown hair that ended just below her shoulders. Frowning she fused her eyebrows together and leaned forward to inspect herself, noticing that she had two rather large dark circles under her eyes.

*So it wasn't a dream after all...* Hermione thought as she felt a warm blush creeping up to her cheeks at the thought of the events the last night.

It had almost been very much like a dream to her... So unreal and unbelievable yet so unforgettable at the same time... Harry had actually made her feel something she had never felt before and frankly, she was still scared to find out what it was...

He had acted so differently that night... Almost as if he had been a different person because Merlin forbid, that was definitely not the same Harry Potter Hermione had known since first year. She felt as if she had seen a different side to him that no one else had seen before and to be honest, it was a side that she was looking forward to meeting once again...

*Oh Merlin...I'd never thought I'd feel this way about my enemy...Well, former enemy...* Hermione thought, smiling to herself. She knew that a Gryffindor-Slytherin friendship was a way dangerous relationship but she only hoped that Harry was serious about keeping the friendship intact in public.

How would she be able to tell Ron and Seamus that she had actually made friends with their enemy and that she had actually agreed to go out on a date with him this Saturday?

*What have I gotten myself into?* Hermione thought desperately as she climbed into a shower stall, immediately setting the cold water shower to full blast to jolt her awake.

She had never seen it coming... The one she had hated and despised for the past three years would actually be the one to haunt her dreams at night.... Hermione blushed as she remembered the *dream* she had just had a while ago before she shook her head vigorously again, trying to clear the thoughts away.

Frankly, she had been surprising even herself lately at her antics when it came to the famous Slytherin boy. She had been doing a lot of crazy things now and sneaking away from her friends so she could follow Harry up to the Astronomy tower last night was definitely one of them.



She didn't want to admit it, but the boy was really getting to her. Though she had to admit that she was developing some sort of fondness for him, she didn't want to end up the same way Parvati did... She didn't want to get hurt... She knew his reputation and his personality too much to be wary of the possibility that she might be falling for—

*Argh, no! I am not!* Hermione interrupted herself to stop her mind from jumping to conclusions.

There was just something about his eyes that had seemed to enthrall her of somewhat... It had brought a strange feeling of butterflies in her stomach and deep in her heart, she knew it would develop into much more than that if she didn't put an end to these fantasies soon.

After all, she couldn't be too sure if Harry's intentions for her were sincere this time after all of the numerous stunts he had tried to pull on her in the past... She couldn't let her guard down that easily.

*No matter what happens, he's still the same guy and no matter how many times his damn beautiful emerald-like eyes sparkles at me, I have to keep a strong mind about this...Damn him and those eyes!* Hermione cursed to herself, shaking her head.

Although... She just couldn't forget that desperate, gentle look in his eyes when he had been crying last night... It had almost seemed as if he needed affection... Like he was frail, weak and innocent... Scared just like the rest of them were and not the fearless hero everyone thought he was...He had given her a look that was almost like... He... He *cared*... Or that he needed her..

And never, in all her years at Hogwarts had anyone ever given her a look like that... Not Ron, not Seamus not anybody and she as hell did not expect it to come from Harry Potter, of all people.

It was that look that had changed her perspective on him completely... She had actually wanted to get to know him... To be there for him... To be his friend and... As much as she didn't want to admit this to even herself... To be a lot more...

*And that kiss...* Hermione sighed blissfully, scrubbing some soap onto herself as she thought about the kiss Harry had given her the night before.

It had been so gentle but so passionate at the same time... So much emotion had been exchanged in that small kiss alone than that of all the aggressive kisses he had given her before combined...

He had kissed her almost as if he was in love or something and the mere thought of that just brought delightful shivers down Hermione's spine. She was almost sure that Harry had felt it too.

That was the very reason why Hermione had once again offered her friendship to Harry that night... She wanted the endless fights and senseless arguments between them to stop. It had gone on long enough already and because...

*I think I can change him somehow...* Hermione realized as she lavishly began applying shampoo on her hair. Maybe if she hung out around him more and showed him exactly what life was really worth living for and just exactly what a true, *meaningful* relationship was, then maybe... Just *maybe*, she can change him for the better...

*Maybe the reason he's become the person he is was because of all those girls he dated before... They were always shallow and superficial...* Hermione thought bitterly, rolling her eyes.

And what about that stupid article?! She couldn't believe that woman Rita Skeeter had actually stooped so low as to spread some rumors about them like that... Though she *had* wondered exactly how she got to know those inside rumors in the first place...

Hermione blushed at her own coyness. She didn't exactly despite the idea of her being the girl Harry was actually interested in... *Oh for Merlin's sake!!* Hermione cursed as she made a tutting sound at herself and turned off the shower, wrapping a towel around her slender body.

*Stop it! You've been thinking about Harry enough already! You have to focus on your schoolwork for today!* Hermione scolded herself as she headed out towards her trunk to get a pair of her school robes,

noticing in relief that Parvati and Lavender had already gone down to breakfast.

However, as she passed by Parvati's trunk, she caught one of her taped up pictures of Harry against her bed, the one with him in his Quidditch uniform, a confident, self-satisfied smirk on his face as the gleaming Quidditch trophy flashed brightly from where he held it in his arm.

Hermione surprised herself when she felt her heart do a back flip in her chest at the sight of the boy's handsome smile. Looking around to check if no one was watching, Hermione pulled the picture off the bed and looked at it intently, smiling at the image.

*Despite everything about you that I still don't like until now... You've still got to be the most handsome guy I have ever met...* Hermione said to it silently, smiling at her own thoughts as she taped the picture back on Parvati's bed and began to dress into her school robes.

"Harry?? Harry?" AJ whispered in the dark as she stepped into the boys' dormitories that same morning.

Right after Harry had left the girls' dorms last night after they had made up; she had been tossing and turning the entire night, worried about the task that her brother had to face.

*Dragons... Hell... I'm surprised he can even think about the task so easily...* AJ thought, shuddering as she pulled her sheer nightgown tighter over her frail body.

Right after she had heard Harry and Draco talking about the dragons the other night, she had raced right out of the Slytherin dungeons to find Cedric so she could tell him the first task.

Cedric had been wary at first, asking her how she had managed to find out about the task but after learning that he was probably the only one who wasn't informed of what was ahead, he had gratefully accepted the piece of information she had given him.

*I just hope Harry doesn't find out that I helped Cedric with the dragons... He wouldn't like that at all...* AJ thought, biting her lip

nervously. And frankly, she definitely did *not* want to start another fight with her twin since they had just come out of one anyway.

Besides... The reason she had told Cedric about the dragons was because she wanted the tournament to be fair play and she did not want any one lacking out on anything... She didn't know about her brother or her housemates but *she*, for one, valued fair sportsmanship.

*Cedric is my friend too, anyway...* She reasoned to herself in confirmation, taking a deep breath before she entered the boys' dorm, shutting the door quietly behind her. A loud snore from the nearest bed suddenly startled her, causing her to jump stub her toe against the bed in surprise.

"Damn!" She hissed to herself, rubbing her toe with a slight annoyed pout on her face. Grimacing slightly in disdain, she eyed to room around her, taking note of how messy and how sloppy it looked compared to the neatness and orderliness of the girls' dorms.

*Boys will be boys I guess...* She thought, smiling to herself as she caught sight of the strewn clothing all over the floor.

Sniffing the air, she wrinkled her nose in disdain again as she recognized the scent of a mixture of the boys' different aftershaves along with a mixture of male sweat, making her head feel dizzy at the strength of the aroma.

*Oh Merlin...* She thought dazedly as she put a hand to her head when she felt the different scents start to take its toll on her. Knowing and growing up with these five boys, she could easily point out their aftershave scents one by one and she could definitely detect each one of them in the room.

She leaned against the doorframe for a minute, looking at the curtain-covered poster-beds one by one. Sniffing the air again, she grinned as she easily recognized her twin's own aftershave, along with Draco's somewhat pine-smelling scent...

*Anyway, what the bloody hell am I doing pinpointing boys' scents?! I'm acting like a lunatic!* She thought in horror, shaking her head as

she headed to the nearest bed, trying to locate where her twin brother could be.

To be honest, this was her first time to enter the boys' dormitories since Harry would always be the one to sneak into the girl's dormitories for them to sleep together so she had absolutely no idea where her brother was. It didn't help that the figures were each buried under the covers. Walking to one of them, she stopped abruptly when she heard a loud snort-like snore from the occupant, causing her to hide her giggle behind her mouth.

*Definitely not Harry...Probably Crabbe or Goyle...* AJ thought indignantly as she walked away from the bed, still trying to stifle her giggles behind her mouth.

She walked over to the next bed, pulling back the green curtains to reveal Blaise, who was buried under the covers, scowling slightly in his sleep. Smiling to herself, she leaned over and gave him an affectionate peck on the forehead before standing up and heading to the bed across from it.

Noticing the invisibility cloak under the bed, AJ grinned to herself. *This is Harry's...* She thought as she pulled back the curtains to reveal a completely indistinguishable figure that was buried under the covers from head to toe. Smirking, she climbed onto the bed beside her twin and peered at the sleeping figure, her face just mere inches from him.

"Harry! Harry, wake up! Harry!" She hissed, immediately wincing and lowering her voice in a vain attempt not to wake the other occupants of the room. He just grumbled and shifted his position, causing AJ to squelch her irritation as he buried himself deeper into the covers, still mumbling unintelligibly.

"Harry! Come on jerk-face, wake up! I have to talk to you!" She hissed again, this time jostling him to wake him up. Her twin just shifted again, pulling the blankets tighter around his lean form as he turned away from her in irritation.

*Hmm...* She grinned and leaned over, poking at his ticklish spots in another effort and immediately causing the boy to flinch in irritation.

Before she knew what was happening, the figure growled and pounced on her, pinning her back to the bed with his body. Her eyes widened as she felt the wand he had pointed at her throat. She couldn't make out his face in the dark but a familiar voice informed her who the figure really was.

"Argh! Dammit Lila, how many times do I have to tell you *not* to sneak into my bed at this hour?!" Draco growled threateningly, his silver eyes flashing dangerously enough for AJ to recognize them in the dark.

"But—"

"You want me that badly huh? You filthy little whore..." Draco growled again, his silver eyes flashing dangerously in a frightening sense of malice that AJ had never seen before. Panicking, she struggled wildly beneath him, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"No! Stop! Get off me! I'm—"

AJ didn't get to finish her sentence as Draco's lips violently claimed her own, forcing her into an aggressive kiss that made her gasp in surprise and try to pull away but Draco's arms felt like iron around her. She began struggling desperately again when she felt Draco's hands moving to explore her body, his lips kissing her roughly with such force that AJ's head was spinning with exhilaration.

Before she could have prevented herself, she suddenly found her arms snaking their way up to Draco's neck to pull him closer, her body traitorously responding to each and every one of the boy's forceful administrations.

Draco's eyes popped open in alarm as he pulled away abruptly, looking at the girl beneath him in shock. *This isn't Lila...She couldn't make me feel like this, it's got to be—*

"AJ??" Draco hissed in the dark, his silver eyes wide with disbelief as he was finally able to make out the emerald-eyes of the girl under him.

"Draco! What the *hell* are you doing?!" AJ hissed angrily at him, now trying to shove him off her and remove his hands from her form.

Draco just smirked at her in amusement, clearly more than contented to stay exactly where he was at the moment. "Just what exactly were *you* doing climbing into my *bed*, Potter? I never knew you were that type of girl...You could have just told me if you had wanted to have a little rough play." He drawled easily.

"You wish, you bloody *asshole*! I saw the invisibility cloak under your bed so I thought you were Harry and it's kind of hard to see your face in the dark! You didn't have to attack me! You nearly scared me to death! It's disgusting!" She hissed back, a faint flush on her face.

Draco blushed, in spite of himself. "I'm sorry but I didn't know it was you. I forgot to return the cloak to Harry the other day..."

AJ rolled her eyes and sneered up at him. "*Great, just great. Would you mind getting off me now, Malfoy? In case you haven't noticed, you straddling me is kind of a compromising situation and I wouldn't want Harry to get the wrong idea about this.*" She retorted, struggling to push him off her.

Draco gave a low, seductive chuckle, grinning impishly at her. *Wow, what is this? An early birthday present? Waking up to a kiss from AJ in a sheer nightgown in my bed?* He thought, chuckling to himself.

"Malfoy, I said get the *fuck* off of me right now! You're starting to scare me!" AJ snapped again, her eyes looking scared and confused now as she fought to keep her calm steady under his piercing, lustful gaze at her body.

Draco looked as though he was about to get up but then he let out a mischievous smirk, grinning down at AJ suggestively.

"Whatever you say, Potter... But not before this." Draco said, not giving the girl a chance to react before he leaned down and caught her lips again in a forceful passionate kiss.

AJ's eyes widened as she struggled to pull away but somehow Draco's arms had miraculously found their way over to pin her own hands to the bed, easily preventing the girl from pushing away his administrations.

Before he could help himself, he immediately deepened the kiss, using the bed to his advantage to kiss her deeper and barely registering the fact that his snog partner was inexperienced and was currently trying to push him off.

“Mmph...Draco, please....Get off me...” She managed to plead into their intertwined lips, immediately causing Draco to soften and slow the kiss down into a gentle caress, kissing her with more ease and gentleness that unknowingly sent a shiver down AJ’s spine.

Then, reluctantly, he finally pulled away and met AJ’s tearful gaze, their faces barely inches apart from where he still had her form pinned on the bed. Seeing the anger and violated look in her eye, Draco finally looked away, ashamed and angry at himself for what he had done.

“I...I—I’m sorry—” He didn’t get to finish as AJ finally freed one of her hands and slapped him across the cheek, the loud, sickening ‘*smack*’ loud enough to finally knock him back to his senses.

“You good-for-nothing *bastard*!” She hissed, raising a hand to slap him once more but Draco managed to catch this one, holding the delicate limb gently in his hand for a long moment and meeting her eyes with a pleading look.

“I—I’m sorry, AJ...I didn’t know what came over me...I’m really sorry....I...I” He stopped and looked away, his eyes dropping in remorse. AJ didn’t say anything, only glaring at him with misty green eyes.

“Why?! Why did you do that?!” She asked, her eyes making it obvious to him that they clearly demanded an answer. Draco met her gaze again and bit his lip, unsure of what he was going to say.

“Because...AJ...I...I...” He stammered, his voice barely above a whisper. AJ didn’t say anything, the anger in her eyes suddenly being replaced with curiosity and confusion as she met his gaze with her own.



The two were so preoccupied with each other that they were barely able to hear the familiar male voice about three minutes later that had suddenly broken the silence of the room.

“Hey Malfoy! What’s with all the hushed whispers?! Is there someone with you there?!”

AJ broke her gaze away from Draco immediately, her eyes widening in panic. “Shit!” They both cursed simultaneously, slightly panting for breath. AJ gave Draco her meanest glare, barely able to hold in the frustrated tears welling up in her eyes.

“This *never* happened, Draco! And it *won’t* happen again!” She hissed, flushed embarrassed and uncomfortable all at the same time. She had actually *kissed* her brother’s best friend... She didn’t know how to react to something like this...

Draco just gave her an unreadable yet somewhat sad smile in reply, his eyes twinkling knowingly. “I’ve been waiting too long, AJ...” He whispered, stroking her cheek.

“Waiting too long for *what*, Draco?!” AJ hissed angrily but Draco didn’t answer, turning away from her to hide the hurt look in his eyes.

“You...You honestly don’t know until know, Potter?” He whispered, sighing as he finally got off her and moved away, refusing to meet her eyes.

“Look, you are obviously still half-asleep so I’m just going to forget this ever happened... ever...” AJ said quietly, avoiding Draco’s eyes.

*Why am I not surprised Potter? Are you honestly that dense? Is it that hard to see me as something more than another damn ‘brother’?* He thought darkly to himself, now tuning out her words.

Ever since that very short kiss he had with her a couple of days ago, Draco had been going crazy with desire every time he had seen the girl nearby. Deciding that is growing feelings definitely could *not* wait anymore, he knew the only way he could get AJ to finally see him as more than just a friend was to take some drastic action about the entire thing.

*"Fuck patience, I'm going for it!"* He had admitted to himself that very same day on the lake after he had first kissed AJ.

Now that he had had a taste of her, he sure as hell wanted a lot more and he was certain that he was going to get it.... After all... He always got what he wanted... *No matter what...* He was a Malfoy after all, and Malfoys never stopped until they got what they wanted... No matter how he did...

After all, he had been patient for three damn years already; it was about time he let himself do something about his feelings for her.

*Harry's not the only one who's good at seduction...* Draco thought mischievously as his lips quirked themselves into the famous Malfoy sneer. *Besides, I've been the understanding, caring 'friend' for too long... I've been a 'good boy' long enough...* He thought, thinking about how long he had held in his growing feelings for AJ.

*Time to bring back the true Draco Malfoy...* He added, his sneer growing slightly. *And Draco Malfoy can be sexier than Harry when he wants to be... Where do you think Harry learned it all, anyway?* He quipped, finally snapping back to reality when AJ made a small sound of frustration at the back of her throat, glaring at him intently.

"Malfoy! Would you bring your brainless mind back down to earth and fix that annoying look on your ugly face?! *You* explain to Harry...*something!* Just don't you *dare* mention this to anyone ever again!" AJ hissed frantically, scrambling off the bed.

Draco managed a grin at her before jumping off the bed, surprisingly making AJ blush when she noticed that he was clad only in a black, velvet pajama bottom, exposing his lean, firm chest.

AJ stood up abruptly, barely managing to fix herself when Harry yanked open the curtains, still yawning sleepily.

"Hey Draco, do you still have my cloak—" Harry stopped midsentence, his eyes widening dangerously as he eyed his twin sister, who was still blushing furiously in only her nightgown, and his best friend, who had a big smirk on his face.

“AJ! What the *fuck* were you two doing?!” Harry growled instantly, narrowing his eyes at his younger sister as he yanked her arm roughly, obviously demanding an answer.

AJ met Draco’s eyes warningly. Draco could almost hear the unspoken words right out of her mouth. *Don’t say anything, Draco...Please...*

“Harry, don’t jump to conclusions, I just came in here to talk to you—”

“Then what the bloody hell are you doing in *his* bed?!” Harry asked suspiciously, his eyes glaring at Draco in threat but Draco just glared right back innocently, raising an eyebrow in mock confusion.

AJ opened her mouth to speak but Draco spoke for her, shrugging at Harry innocently.

“She thought I was you because your invisibility cloak was under my bed. Easy mistake for anyone to make.” Draco said simply, raising an eyebrow.

Harry’s eyes were now dangerously glowing with anger at him. “I swear Malfoy, if you had *touched* my sister in any way possible, I will personally remove your crotch from your body and—”

“Harry! I swear, it was nothing! I just really thought he was you and when I realized he wasn’t, we started arguing so loudly like we usually do and I guess...We were so loud we woke you up! Harry, come on! Would I really think of *Draco* here that way? Please...He’s like a brother to me. You know that.” AJ reasoned, giving a laugh in amusement.

Harry looked visibly relieved as he managed a laugh along with her, both teenagers never noticing the look of intense hurt that had crossed Draco’s face as his eyes dropped and he turned away, visibly stung at AJ’s words.

AJ decided she had better change the topic as she grinned and ran over to give her brother a hug. “Anyway, Harry, I just came over to wish you good luck again for the tournament later. I was kind of

curious though, what are you planning to do against the dragons?" She asked, looking at him.

Harry narrowed his eyes again in confusion, looking at her suspiciously. "How did *you* know about the dragons?" He asked.

AJ's eyes widened as she mentally scolded herself for her own stupidity. "Well, y-you... You told me, remember? Last night, you told me the task was dragons!" AJ answered hastily, giving Harry another sweet smile.

"Oh... Okay, well...If you must know, I reckon a summoning charm would do the trick right?" Harry asked, shrugging as he scooped up the invisibility cloak under Draco's bed in his arms.

AJ shrugged and nodded in reply but Draco didn't seem to be paying attention, his gaze wandering off in space as he failed to notice the peculiar look Harry was giving him.

"Hey, Drac, what do you think?" He asked, giving his best friend a light punch on the shoulder to get his attention.

The blonde finally blinked and managed to give him a smirk, raising an eyebrow with questioning look. "*Summoning charm?! What the fuck* are you going to do, summon a dragon tamer?" Draco asked sarcastically.

Harry glared at him. "No, you'll find out soon enough, anyway." He spat out, rolling his eyes as he headed for the showers.

"Oh, and before I forget, AJ, Siri— Er, I mean, *Padfoot* wants to talk us right before the task. He's going to check up on us, you could come too, Malfoy, I think he'll be glad to see the three of us." Harry said, almost cheerfully.

AJ looked at him in disbelief. "Er, Harry, are you okay?" She asked warily.

"Of course I am, why?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Because.. You're actually smiling... No... *Grinning*..." She said, narrowing her eyes.

Draco noticed this too, smirking at Harry in amusement. "Yeah, Potter, what's up, you have a good lay?" He taunted.

Draco almost didn't react when Harry had flung his wand at him, having only enough time to prevent himself from losing an eye when he caught the wand just a few mere inches away from his left eye.

"Sod off, Malfoy! Mind your own business!" Harry snapped behind his back as he walked into the bathroom and slammed the shower door shut violently, causing Crabbe and Goyle to snort in their sleep again.

Draco burst out laughing, shaking his head. "Nope. That's still the Harry we all know and love alright..." He kidded wryly but AJ was currently just glaring at him in question.

"What's wrong? Why are you giving me that look, Potter?! It doesn't do wonders for your ugly face you know..." Draco kidded gently, giving her a smile.

AJ's voice shook as she glared at him in anger. "How could you do that?! Forcing that kiss on me...Draco, what were you thinking?" She demanded.

"Forcing *what* on you? This?" Draco asked again as he stepped forward and cupped her cheek with his hands, pulling her towards him again but AJ pulled back instantly and raised a hand, slapping him again.

"Stop it! Draco, just stop it! I don't know what's gotten into you but you have got to stop this! You're not supposed to be acting this way! I...You...We're not supposed to be seeing each other *that* way!" She tried to reason wildly though something in the way her heart was pounding against her chest made her think otherwise.

Draco clutched his cheek in pain, looking at her with a look AJ was too afraid to interpret. "Look Potter, I know you think that way but I'm not going to let this go. Not this time. Not until you realize what it is

you really want.” He said softly, gently stroking her cheek with his thumb in an affectionate manner.

“Let *what* go exactly?! And how would *you* know what I want, Malfoy?! I don’t understand you at all! Get your head sorted out first, you’re obviously not thinking straight anymore!” She screeched again, searching his eyes in confusion.

“Stop pretending, dammit! I know you know what I’m talking about! You can’t possibly *not know* what you are to me! Or how I feel about you! Dammit Potter, *think!!*” Draco raged impatiently, running a furious hand through his silver-blond hair in anger.

“No, I *don’t*, Draco but perhaps you could explain it to me.” AJ said sarcastically, crossing her arms over her chest with a cold look on her face.

*I don’t believe this!* Draco thought, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets in agonized frustration.

“Hey you know what? If you’re going to play *the stupid thick bitch*, then forget it, Potter! Look, *fuck you*, alright?! For someone who’s the second highest witch in the year, you sure are fucking dense! Figure it out for yourself!” Draco exploded angrily before he heatedly followed into the shower room, his eyes blazing with unmistakable rage.

AJ’s jaw dropped open, as Draco violently slammed the door in fury, leaving her standing there like an idiot in total silence.

*What just happened?! Is there something I should know about or something?!* She asked herself, shaking her head she moved to walk out of the room when she stopped abruptly as she heard a familiar voice.

“AJ!! What the fuck are you doing in the boys’ dorms?!” Blaise demanded as he finally woke up to Draco’s shouting, giving the girl a glare.

AJ grinned as he tried to cover himself up with his blanket, still glaring at her threateningly. "Oh lighten up, Blaise! It's not like I haven't seen any of that before!" She teased.

"You *haven't* and frankly, I don't want you to!" He snapped at her. AJ giggled, blowing him a mocking kiss before she left the room, somehow feeling as though despite her smile, she definitely had a reason to be miserable.

"Sirius!" AJ exclaimed as she, Harry and Draco saw Sirius' head sitting in the fireplace in the empty Slytherin Common Room, causing both Harry and Draco to jump slightly in surprise.

Harry plopped himself down on one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace, looking at his godfather in relief. He had to notice that Sirius' face seemed to be much more similar to the handsome, young man Harry had seen in their parents' pictures before.

His face seemed fuller, as though he had finally been eating enough and his once matted hair was now clean and cut, barely making him recognizable as the once Azkaban convict Harry had seen before.

"Hey Padfoot, how have you been?" Harry greeted, giving his godfather an impish grin.

Sirius looked at him with a solemn expression, raising an eyebrow at the three teenagers in front of him. "Never mind me, how have you three been? Have you been keeping yourselves out of trouble?" He asked suspiciously.

AJ had the decency to hang her head in guilt as Harry and Draco both shot each other reckless grins, making Sirius smile in spite of himself.

"Well, / have but you should see the things these two are doing now! I mean, just yesterday, Draco had some Hufflepuffs—" AJ stopped speaking abruptly when Draco clamped his hand over her mouth, giving Sirius an innocent smile.

“Nothing, it’s nothing! Anyway, we’re fine, good as always! Still lusted after the entire population of Hogwarts!” Draco said smugly, smirking as Harry raised an eyebrow at him.

Sirius laughed, shaking his head. “Well then Harry, I believe you owe me quite a story about this whole tournament thing.” He said gravely, giving his godson a stern look.

AJ scowled, slapping Draco’s hand away from her mouth as she grumbled to herself, rolling her eyes and fortunately, not seeing the poisonous glare Draco gave her in return. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair, before he began to explain in detail to his godfather everything that had been happening lately.

Sirius listened to him closely, his eyes full of concern and anxiety as Harry ranted on and on, releasing the stress he had been feeling for months now.

“Let’s not worry about the dragons and the tournament just now, Harry, there are other things I need to warn you three about. I can’t stay long since I only broke into a muggle house to use their fireplace but I need to tell you a few things.” Sirius interrupted, shaking his head.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, what could be worse than *dragons*?” Harry asked in slight trepidation, his face scrunching up into a furious scowl.

“Well, Karkaroff, he’s a... He was a Death Eater, you know what they are, don’t you?” Sirius asked him.

Harry and Draco exchanged looks. “Yes, I do... Why? What happened?” Harry asked in slight suspicion, narrowing his eyes.

“He was caught and he was put into Azkaban with me before but somehow, he got released. That was probably the reason why Dumbledore hired Moody in the first place, to keep a close eye on that bastard while he’s here...” Sirius explained darkly.

“That asshole was released?! How could that happen?” Draco demanded in shock.



“He did this deal with the Ministry of Magic, saying he saw his mistakes and he proved it by naming a lot more other Death Eaters... Not too popular in Azkaban, I tell you... And the moment he got out, he started teaching the Dark Arts to every student who goes to his school so watch out for Viktor Krum as well..” Sirius warned.

Harry and Draco exchanged looks again, Draco shifting rather uneasily. *Krum’s not the only one who knows the Dark Arts...* He thought, shooting a look at his best friend.

Harry just stared back blankly, not wanting Sirius or AJ to know anything he didn’t want them to.

“So... You’re saying Karkaroff may have put my name in the goblet? But he didn’t want me in the damn thing in the first place...” Harry said slowly, avoiding the glare Draco was giving him.

“Well, he’s a damn good actor anyway, Harry, after all, he convinced the Ministry of Magic with his lies but see, I’ve been reading the Daily Prophet, Harry, and—”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, you’re not going to bring up that article that Skeeter woman wrote about me, are you?” Harry snapped, rolling his eyes as Draco and AJ both blushed at the mention of the article.

“Not that one, Harry. If you remember the one about Moody, it says he was attacked the night before he started Hogwarts and I reckon someone had thought that if Moody was around, they would have a difficult time with their job... Moody was the best damn Auror the Ministry had after all...” Sirius explained, looking thoughtful.

“So what are you saying? Karkaroff is trying to kill me?” Harry asked again, looking doubtful.

Sirius looked hesitant. “Well... I’ve noticed the Death Eaters have been active nowadays... Did you hear about that ministry witch who’s gone missing?” He asked.

“Erm...” Harry and AJ both looked at him blankly.

“Bertha Jorkins. I read that she disappeared in Albania.” Draco quipped, smirking at Harry and AJ’s ignorance for the news.

“Exactly! That’s where Voldemort was rumored to be last...” Sirius told them.

“But it isn’t likely that she would run directly into Voldemort anyway, right?” Harry asked.

“Just to tell you three, I knew Bertha Jorkins. She was this incredibly nosy and brainless witch at school who was a couple of years ahead of me and James and mind you, being nosy and brainless is not exactly a good combination...” Sirius said dismally.

“So that means Voldemort could know about the tournament! Karkaroff might be here on his orders or something!” AJ exclaimed, speaking for the first time in the entire conversation.

“I’m really not sure AJ... I don’t know if Karkaroff would go back to Voldemort but I’m thinking whoever put Harry’s name in the goblet is looking for the easiest way to get rid of him without being caught...” Sirius said, sighing in frustration.

“Well they’re fighting a losing battle here. I have everything under control.” Harry said smugly, smirking in confidence.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at him. “Right.... I wouldn’t get too confident if I were you champ, there are much harder tasks coming up. Not just in the tournament too. Anyway, about the dragons, I would suggest a very simple spell that might work against it.” He said.

“What spell is that?”

“Well, I reckon a good—”

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his eyes widening slightly as he heard a horde of footsteps racing into the Common Room, making the three of them scramble up in panic.

“Go! Our housemates are coming back!” AJ hissed at Sirius in alarm, scrambling up to hide Sirius’ face in the fire.

They heard a tiny pop in the fire behind them and knowing Sirius had gone, the three Slytherins turned to see an excited group of Slytherins racing into the Common Room, their *Harry Potter, the Slytherin Champion* badges pinned proudly onto their robes.

“Harry! The first task is about to begin! Come on!” Pansy squealed excitedly, jumping onto him in eagerness, making them both collapse rather sloppily onto the floor.

Draco and AJ both smirked as Harry untangled himself from the girl, grimacing in disgust. “Great... I can hardly wait...” Harry muttered sarcastically under his breath.

“Good luck, Potter!” Draco said, offering his hand, which Harry took and gave their secret handshake weakly, sighing.

AJ leaned over and gave her brother a kiss on the cheek, hugging him very tightly almost as though she was afraid to let him go. “Take care of yourself, Harry...” She whispered dreadfully, her eyes full of fear and worry.

Harry gave her a reassuring smile, shaking his head. “Don’t worry, AJ. I’ll be fine! Come on.” He lied, putting on a false confident smile as he began leading them out of the Common Room.

*I sure hope I know what the bloody hell I’m about to do...*He thought to himself.

Harry ran a shaky hand through his hair as he walked into the tent where the other champions were waiting, masking his fear and nervousness with a sneer. He settled himself on the stool next to Fleur, who was looking pale and clammy than usual, nervously biting her nails in anticipation.

Seeing Harry however, she straightened up and instantly flashed him a dazzling smile which Harry only returned with a nod, surprising himself as he noticed Fleur’s alluring beauty didn’t have the normal effect it would on him on most occasions.

*I guess I still have Hermione on the brain...*He thought in dreadful realization. Then, laughing slightly at himself, he shook his head,

rolling his eyes at his own absurd thought. Just to prove his own assumption wrong, he turned and gave Fleur a charming smile of his own, making the girl laugh slightly and turn away.

Viktor Krum gave Harry one of his usual dark scowls which Harry gladly returned, his muscles tensing with anger as he stared at the much bigger boy in absolute loathing. *This guy doesn't know who he's dealing with...* He thought darkly, narrowing his eyes.

Cedric was pacing back and forth between the room nervously, occasionally peering out of the tent every now and then to check up on the students who were passing by.

Within a couple of minutes, Harry could hear the heavy sounds of the students' footsteps passing as they all heard their excited murmuring and chattering when they made their way to the stands.

"Well, ladies first." Bagman said cheerfully as he walked into the tent carrying a purple bag, offering the bag to Fleur with a jovial smile on his face.

Putting a shaking hand into the bag, she pulled out a tiny model of a dragon, a *Welsh Green*, with the number two around its neck and seeing the determined, unsurprised look in her eyes, Harry assumed she had also known about the dragons beforehand.

"Mr. Krum, if you please." Bagman offered again before Krum stood up and pulled out a scarlet *Chinese Fireball*, a number 3 visible on its neck as well as Krum sulkily walked back to his spot, staring at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag and pulled out the bluish-gray *Swedish short-snout* and knowing what was indeed left, Harry sighed before pulling out the *Hungarian Horntail* with the big fat number four tied on its neck.

"Great... I just had to get this one, huh? No surprise at all..." He muttered to no one in particular, remembering what Charlie Weasley had said about the Hungarian Horntail before.

Harry looked at Cedric in suspicion, slightly surprised that he wasn't shocked about the task of getting past live dragons. *I thought he was the only one who didn't know the first task... I wonder who told him...* Harry thought.

"Well there you have it! You all have your respective dragons now and the number tied around its neck is the order in which you will all come out and face them! Your task is to collect the golden egg your chosen dragon is protecting! Now, I'll have to leave you all in a while since I have to commentate the match so Mr. Diggory? Just go out into the enclosure when you here my whistle okay?" Bagman explained, looking intently at them.

Cedric nodded, his face paler than usual as he shakily took out his wand from his pocket, holding it firmly in his hands.

"Well then, Harry, a brief word with you outside, if you please!" Bagman exclaimed, leading a reluctant Harry out of the tent away from the other champions. "Well Harry, anything I can get you? You need help with anything?" He asked him, looking at him in an almost fatherly concern.

Harry backed away in suspicion, narrowing his eyes as he gave the man a fake, smile. "No thanks, Mr. Bagman, I think I can handle everything." He said disdainfully.

"Got a plan? Because I wouldn't mind giving you some ideas, if you want." Bagman offered, lowering his voice to a whisper.

Harry raised an eyebrow, looking at the man in dislike. "Erm... No thanks, Mr. Bagman, I *have* a plan. I know what to do." He answered rather stiffly, a hint of indignation and mild insult in his voice.

"Nobody *would* know, Harry..." Bagman hinted, winking at him as he clapped his shoulder again.

"Really! I'm fine! I can handle this; I've been in worse situations before!" Harry snapped, glaring at the spot on his shoulder where Bagman had slapped him. Before Bagman could answer him, they heard a loud whistle, causing Bagman to jump up abruptly, checking his watch.

“Good Merlin! Well, I better get going, I have to commentate this event! Good luck Harry!” He said hurriedly, taking off as Harry stared after him, eyebrow raised slightly in annoyance before he walked back to the tent, passing by Cedric, who was on his way out, the boy looking like he wanted to disappear under the ground.

Harry flashed him a taunting sneer as he walked by, making the boy even more nervous as he did. “Break a leg, Diggory.” Harry taunted sarcastically, sniggering to himself when he saw Cedric gulp nervously, his face a harsh shade of ashen.

“Thanks, Potter.” Was the quiet, slightly uneasy reply before Cedric walked on as Harry entered the tent with Fleur and Krum again, hearing the roar of the crowd as Cedric entered the enclosure.

Harry sat down shakily on his stool again, trying desperately to hide his fear and nervousness by starting to whistle carelessly to himself, earning him an annoyed glare from Krum, which he gladly returned once again.

Harry smirked at Krum once again, trying not to show his anticipation and apprehension as he heard the crowd begin screaming, gasping and yelling for Cedric as he did whatever he had to do to get past his dragon.

Frustrated, Harry let out a sharp breath before he started to drum his fingers against the table nervously, his hand slightly shaking.

Annoyed with himself now, he ran a furious hand through his hair in an effort to calm himself down before he jumped up and started retracing Cedric’s footsteps when he had been circling the tent earlier.

Krum just glowered as usual, glaring at the floor in silence as Fleur’s breaths were coming in short pants, facing the tent’s opening as she continued to nibble on her fingernails.

Bagman’s incredibly annoying comments didn’t help, making Harry’s imagination run wild with images he didn’t want to imagine he would have ever have to face.

More out of agitation than anything else, Harry began whistling again as he tapped his foot repeatedly against the ground, wanting to block out the nervous warnings his head was formulating. This continued on for about five more minutes before Krum finally got up and stalked over to Harry, trying to intimidate him with his slightly taller height.

“Could you please stop vid di vhistling and foot tapping?! It is driving me insane!” He snapped threateningly, grabbing a fistful of Harry’s robes and yanking his face towards him.

Harry just sneered at him, gingerly removing the other boy’s hands off him as though Krum had some sort of contagious disease before he began snobbishly dusting his robes where he had touched him in distaste.

“Let me tell you something, *Mr. Krum*, Here in Hogwarts, it’s important that you recognize who exactly everyone is afraid of and that’s *me*. And if you think you’re going to walk all over me just because you’re some bloody Quidditch player and because you’re slightly bigger than me, you’ve got another thing coming. *Everyone* knows better than to defy *Harry Potter*.” Harry explained calmly, his cold eyes glinting maliciously.

“And just vat exactly do you mean by that?” Krum asked in response, retuning the look Harry was giving him.

Fleur just looked in between them with wide, surprised eyes, noticing the tension and uneasiness between the two champions.

Harry gave him a dangerously innocent smile, raising an eyebrow tauntingly. “Let’s just say, I’m very powerful and influential in this school and even a famous, boneheaded Quidditch jock like you can’t get past me.” Harry said simply, still smiling as he turned around abruptly, leaving the other boy glaring after him.

Before Krum or Fleur could say anything, they all heard the deafening cheers of the crowd, indicating that Cedric had gotten past the dragon and had collected the golden egg, which meant that it was Fleur’s turn now.

Fleur let out a shaky breath before she stepped out of the tent, her head held up high bravely and her wand clutched tightly in her shaking hand.

Harry sat back down across the tent, still glaring darkly at Krum, who was glaring right back, both of them remaining dead silent for the rest of Fleur's turn until they finally heard the loud cheering of the crowd again, informing them that Fleur had been successful as well.

Harry jeered tauntingly as Krum stood up and headed out of the tent, leaving Harry alone to deal with his own silent nervousness and anticipation for the whole of the event.

*Hope Krum gets his annoying ass bitten by his dragon.* Harry thought bitterly, briefly amused by the idea but it wasn't enough to calm his racing heart as he noticed his fingers begin trembling with anxiety.

Within a short while, Harry heard the loud cheers of the crowd outside and Bagman exclaiming out loud that Krum has indeed collected his own egg which meant that it would be Harry's turn within a couple of seconds.

Taking a deep breath, Harry stood up just as he heard the loud whistle, making his way outside the tent through the numerous trees outside until he reached the gap in the enclosure fence, allowing him to see the hundreds of faces staring down at him from the stands that been magicked there.

Momentarily searching the massive crowd, he couldn't help but let a confident smirk break out on his face as he heard the familiar voices of mostly his housemates rooting for him within the crowd but as he caught sight of the huge Hungarian Horntail at the other end of the enclosure, his smirk had faltered into a shaky grimace.

*Oh fuck... What the bloody hell have I gotten myself into?* He thought in realization as he began to take slow, steady footsteps towards the dragon, his face scrunching up in concentration.

The Horntail eyed him dangerously with its yellow eyes, its yard-long tail thrashing about, leaving long marks on the ground and its scaly skin a glinting black as she crouched low over her clutch of eggs.



Eyes wide in desperation now, Harry looked up to see his twin from the stands. AJ gave him a small, determined smile, nodding slightly and Harry could almost hear her voice as her look gave him an unspoken message in his mind.

*“You can do this, Harry...”*

Taking another deep breath, Harry felt his confidence returning as he grinned impishly before he suddenly raised his wand and pointed it at the Horntail, bravely taking some more steps towards the dragon.

Just as he opened his mouth to yell out the spell, Harry briefly caught sight of Hermione in the stands, who gave him an encouraging smile as she opened her mouth and yelled out the spell with him at the same time.

*“Accio Firebolt!”*

The impact of seeing Hermione muttering the spell with him was incredible! Within mere seconds, Harry felt the cool, smooth handle of his Firebolt slam powerfully against his waiting palm and within an instant; he had mounted it and taken off into the air, feeling the familiar thrill of flying pump up adrenaline into his system.

*Is a summoning charm supposed to be that fast and powerful?!* He thought as he gracefully glided through the air, soaring upwards, away from the Horntail, as he eyed it from the air, narrowing his eyes in concentration.

He couldn't think about the impact of his spell or how he had conjured up such a powerful summoning charm now... Right now he had to focus on this task... Harry couldn't even hear Bagman's annoying comments as he flew up higher into the sky... He didn't even think about the dragon anymore...

Right now, this was just another Quidditch match for him and the dragon was just another puny, ugly-faced opponent... Nothing he couldn't handle... It was all too familiar now... He was back where he belonged... He was just on a Quidditch pitch, playing another Quidditch match just like he always did....

Looking down at the clutch of eggs, Harry spotted the golden one and sneered to himself, tightening his hold on his Firebolt.

“Okay Potter, diversionary tactics, let’s go!” He muttered to himself under his breath, preparing to dive. Just as he was about to swoop in, he heard too familiar female voices, shouting up at him.

“Go Harry!!” AJ and Hermione both screamed unknowingly at the same time.

That did it. Harry dived down instantly, swooping in and around the dragon as the Horntail’s head followed his every move but Harry knew exactly what to do when the dragon shot out a jet of fire, avoiding it easily as if it was nothing more than a mere bludger.

“Great Scott, this boy can fly! Are you watching this, Mister Krum?!” Bagman exclaimed excitedly.

Harry swirled around the Horntail, trying to get the dragon to leave her eggs but the dragon just hissed at him, repeatedly sending a blaze of fire towards him, which Harry continually avoided but because of this however, he didn’t see the long tail coming up to meet him which had managed to hit him, its long, sharp spikes cutting into his shoulder.

Harry heard low groans and screaming from the crowd but he ignored it for the minute, along with the stinging in his shoulder as he tried to think of a possible plan for the dragon, still flying higher and higher above it.

“Ah, screw it, I’m going for it!” Harry yelled out loud to himself, flying above her in an attempt to get her to move away from the eggs she was protecting.

Harry let out a triumphant grin as the dragon launched herself at him, allowing him to dive down dangerously and take the golden egg from her before he soared off away from the Horntail, now aware of the deafening screams and cheers of the crowd.

“Will you look at that?! Our youngest champion is the fastest one to get his egg!” Bagman had yelled out in shock and amazement, causing the stands to erupt into loud screams again.

Harry, who was still slightly out of breath, flashed the crowd a self-satisfied smile, nodding at them in acknowledgement before he made to get back down but he stopped abruptly when he saw AJ’s frightened look at him, causing him to widen his eyes in question.

“Harry! Behind you!” She screamed in horror.

Harry barely had time to dodge the attack behind him as the Horntail seemed to have escaped the dragon tamers and was lunging for him in mid-air, furiously breathing fire at him in absolute rage.

“What the—” Harry sputtered as he dodged another attack, watching in horror as the Horntail angrily fought off the dragon tamers who were trying to restrain her.

“Oh dear Merlin! The task is over but it looks as though the Horntail is not willing to be beaten that easily! It’s still going after Mr. Potter and if he doesn’t get out of there soon, things may turn deadly indeed!” Bagman yelled out in horror.

“Harry! Get out of there!” AJ screamed furiously.

“Potter, get down now, you idiot!” Draco yelled up at him as well, cupping his hands around his mouth in an effort for Harry to hear him.

*Oh no...* Hermione thought in growing fear from where she was standing with the other Gryffindors as she watched Harry dangerously avoid the dragon, who was looking incredibly enraged and angry.

“Yeah, I hope Potter gets his big head bitten off by that dragon!” Ron yelled out in amusement, causing Hermione to turn and give him a glare.

He looked back at her blankly. “What?!” Sighing and rolling her eyes, Hermione just made a tutting noise before focusing her attention back to the event.

“Dammit!” Harry cursed under his breath as the dragon managed to cut him again, this time on his left leg, giving him a rather shallow but long cut.

“Somebody stun her!” He heard a dragon tamer yell out in panic.

Harry’s eyes widened as he saw the dragon directly across from him, getting ready to breath a whole blaze of burning fire right at his form.

*Bloody hell! Do something! Do something now!* His mind screamed at him, causing him to snatch up his wand from his robes and shakily point it at the dragon in front of him. More out of desperation than anything else, Harry muttered the first spell that came into his mind.

*“Avada Kedavra!”*

His eyes widened when he heard the words but he couldn’t stop the flash of bright green light that had surprisingly erupted from his wand and headed for the dragon, killing it instantly.

Harry’s jaw dropped open in shock as the dragon let out its final wail before it started plummeting back to the ground, crashing violently in the middle of the enclosure.

The crowd in the stands, thinking that Harry had only stunned the dragon and not knowing that he had actually performed the killing curse, began cheering and screaming madly once again, impressed that Harry had not only gotten past the dragon but fought it as well.

The dragon tamers inspected the Horntail in shocked silence, looking up at Harry, who was still in the sky on his Firebolt, in absolute amazement and fear, their eyes wide with disbelief and slight fury.

Harry couldn’t react as he only stared at the tip of his wand in stunned horror, looking from his wand to the dead dragon below him. *How could I perform such a complex dark spell as the killing curse?!* He asked himself in slight fear, his hand shaking.

*I haven’t even done the curse before; how the fuck could I do it now?!* He asked his mind in confusion and bewilderment as he saw Prof. Dumbledore and Prof. Snape heading out into the enclosure with a

dragon tamer, who had obviously been the one who had told them about what had happened.

The crowd had been escorted out of the stands now and were heading back up to the school in an excited murmuring and chattering once again, all of them still talking about Harry's impressive display of magical expertise and bravery.

Slightly nervous, Harry slowly settled himself back onto the ground in silence, still holding his wand as though it was on fire in his shaking hand.

As soon as he walked up to Dumbledore and Snape, who were both waiting for him with shocked, questioning looks on their faces, the dragon tamer with them shook his head, looking from the lifeless Horntail to Harry.

"I think you had better deal with this, Headmaster." He said quietly, nodding to the other dragon tamers to carry the dead dragon away.

Dumbledore sighed, looking intently at Harry, who was still staring at his wand in silence. "Harry... Do you have any idea what you have done?" He asked, looking at him with a grave expression.

Harry blinked twice before looking up at the stunned look on the headmaster's face. "Yes, sir..." He said blankly, dropping his eyes.

"Harry, who taught you how to do the killing curse?" Snape asked him, looking at him intently as he put a comforting hand on Harry's uninjured shoulder.

"No one, Professor! I don't know how that happened!" Harry exclaimed, looking back and forth between the two men in front of him in innocence.

"Then how, on earth, Harry, could you have performed the killing curse on a dragon and kill it instantly without anyone teaching you? It takes years to master that kind of advanced magic Harry... I've seen grown men, Harry, fully grown wizards attempt to do the spell and all they managed to do was a mere nose bleed!" Snape told him as Harry glared down at the ground in silence.

"I am quite surprised that someone as young as you has performed it so easily like you did...Or surprised you had performed it at all! How did that happen?" Prof. Snape asked him.

Harry's eyes flashed in indignation. "I don't know, Professor! I honestly don't know! The minute I saw that damn dragon heading right for me, I just stuck out my wand and shouted out the first spell that came into my mind... I didn't know the spell would actually work like that!" He answered.

"Oh no... It has already started as we know it..." Dumbledore muttered under his breath so that Snape and Harry couldn't hear him.

"What was that, Headmaster?" Snape asked him curiously.

Dumbledore shook his head, looking intently at Harry. "Harry, is this the first time this has happened to you? Have you ever done any more highly advanced magic curses before?" He asked him grimly.

Harry looked away, not wanting the headmaster to see the small amount of guilt in his eyes as he had to lie to him. "No, professor. This was my first... I never meant for it to actually happen..." He answered.

Dumbledore remained silent as Snape began questioning him again, the shock and surprise still evident in his voice.

"Harry, you do know the seriousness of your actions... You must understand that *never* in my entire year of teaching in Hogwarts, have I ever encountered a fourth year student who has managed to actually perform the killing curse and actually get it to work... This was your first try?" He asked.

Harry nodded wordlessly.

"Though I must admit that your actions have shocked me greatly, I cannot help but feel proud of you, Harry... You are indeed a very powerful wizard, from what I can see." Snape said, winking at Harry in pride.

“Severus!” Dumbledore scolded mildly, causing Snape to flinch and throw an apologetic look at the older wizard.

Harry couldn’t prevent the smirk that had spread across his face.

“Normally, Harry, the use of the killing curse, especially by an underage wizard, is punishable by law itself but seeing that you had used the curse for the mere purpose of self-defense and that it had been an innocent accident, I can let it slip by me for now and after talking to our kind dragon tamers, they have agreed that it wasn’t entirely your fault and will agree to keep this whole thing a secret.” Dumbledore told him, making Harry sigh in relief.

“*However*, you have to realize Harry, that this should never happen again. Whether it works or not, you should never use any of the unforgivable curses for any reason whatsoever and I do not want to hear of you using the killing curse ever again... That is a very dangerous curse a wizard could learn to use and I certainly don’t enjoy the idea of someone of your age and level to know how to perform it.” Dumbledore explained rather sternly, looking at Harry with a serious look.

Harry nodded again, nervously twirling his wand around his fingers.

“Now, I want not *one* word of this to anyone, Harry. Not your housemates, not your friends, not to Mr. Malfoy and not even to your twin sister... I do not want the students learning of this accident...” Dumbledore told him.

“Indeed... Luckily for you Harry, you and the dragon were so high up in the air that the other students didn’t hear you use the killing curse like that.” Snape told him.

“But professor, how was I able to perform such a powerful and advanced curse? From what Prof. Moody explained to us, he said that someone of our age could yell out that curse as many times as he wanted and not cause anything at all... How is it that I got it on my first try?” Harry asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

Dumbledore and Snape both exchanged dark looks, looking at Harry with an unreadable expression in their eyes.

“Yes, well... Harry, you have never been like most wizards your age are... We believe that at this age, your magical powers may already be strong enough to occasionally perform very powerful spells... No doubt your power may grant you to use more of these advance spells in the future but I don’t want you to try anymore of these. There are some spells that are not worth learning... And one of them is the killing curse...” Dumbledore said slowly.

Harry didn’t say anything as he just stared down at his feet in slight shock, trying to suppress the overly pleased smirk that was fighting to break out on his face.

“Yes, and Potter, do try and control that impulsive streak you have... I have some ideas that the reason you may have been able to cast the killing curse was because of your tendency to act before thinking... Combine that with strong potential magical powers, it could get rather dangerous.” Snape said, giving Harry a look of pure pride.

“Very well, Prof. Snape.” Harry answered, obediently nodding at his head of house. Harry bit his lip in silence for a moment before he looked up at the two wizards, almost afraid to ask what was on his mind.

“Uhm... Well... Professors? Is it possible that this might happen again? And how is it possible that I managed to perform such a spell? Won’t I get in trouble for being able to perform the killing curse or something? And will this cost me anything in the tournament?” Harry asked cautiously.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a minute.

“Well... As I said Harry, I have spoken to the dragon tamers and they have informed me that they will indeed keep this a secret from other wizards and that it was perfectly alright for you to kill the Horntail since it was rather a deadly beast anyway... And no, you won’t get in trouble. This was just a mere accident after all... It’s not like you expected to do the spell or wanted to in the first place.” He said.



"It just came out." Harry affirmed with wide eyes, nodding in an almost too innocent way. Dumbledore couldn't help but inspect him more closely but sighing, he nodded and gave Harry a reassuring smile.

"And it's not like it will ever happen again anyway... It was an honest mistake to begin with... I suppose you just got lucky that time... Perhaps your magical powers had just been charged at high levels at the exact same moment you yelled out the spell so you managed to perform it... The way I see it, you just got terribly lucky, Harry." Dumbledore told him, avoiding the younger wizard's eyes so he couldn't see the falseness in his eyes.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows in slight doubt. *Is it just me or is Dumbledore not telling me something I should know about?* He thought suspiciously.

Snape nodded, a little too enthusiastically, as he clapped Harry lightly on the back, leading him back towards the tent where the other champions had headed as Dumbledore headed off back to the other judges, who were looking at them in question.

"And don't worry about the tournament, Harry! You did bloody great and to think you were the youngest champion there.... You were the fastest one to get the egg... You were the best, if I do say so myself. Certainly no competition with Diggory..." Snape said, saying the other house's champion's name in slight disdain.

Harry let out a laugh, feeling his confidence return as he talked with his head of house. "What did the other champions do, anyway, sir?" He asked curiously.

"Well, Diggory did this Transfiguration charm and tried to get his dragon to go after the retriever... Creative, I'd say but not exactly impressive... Then, Ms. Delacour did this prissy little charm that sent the dragon asleep... Not exactly what I would call daring though." Snape said flatly, obviously very disinterested.

"What did Krum, do?" Harry asked, his eyes blazing.

"Mr. Krum was, though I have to admit," Snape said bitterly, jet-black eyes glinting maliciously, "the best after you, though Harry... He hit the dragon with a spell in the eye but that was a rather stupid move on his part since the dragon trampled around and squashed the real eggs." He explained carelessly.

"Bet they took marks off for that." Harry commented casually, smirking in amusement.

"Yes... Though if the judges learned that you, Harry, had managed to actually *kill* your dragon, I'm sure there would be marks for that as well." Snape said derisively, giving him a pointed look.

Harry grinned sheepishly, running a hand through his hair.

"I certainly have no doubts why you were placed in my house." Snape said, smirking.

Harry returned the smirk. "*Indeed*, sir. Did you by any chance get my scores? I didn't see them." He asked.

"Rather impressive marks too, Harry. I believe Bagman gave you a ten, Dumbledore gave you a nine and yes, Madame Maxime gave you a ten... Though Karkaroff, slimy, biased bastard he is, gave you a four... Wanted to make sure you only tied with his champion...Snape said darkly.

Harry felt a rush of anger and indignation rushing to his face. "I've tied with *Krum?!'*" He asked in shock.

Snape nodded grimly.

"Yes... Well, you're going to have to just beat him in the next task, Harry. It's that simple and I am quite sure it would be easy for you. Now go back into the tent and have Poppy get you cleaned up, you're a bloody mess and I mean that quite literally." Snape said, giving him a sardonic smile.

Harry grinned back, shrugging. "Ah, this is nothing, Prof. I've handled worse before anyway." He quipped, smirking before he stalked inside

the tent, walking into one of the cubicles and plopping himself down on a stool.

Seeing Cedric's form sitting up in the next one and Harry couldn't help but feel a little disappointed that the other boy wasn't banged up too badly with only a few burns on that precious face of his.

"Your precious face get hurt, Diggory?" Harry asked him from his own cubicle, knowing that Cedric couldn't see his still sneering face from where he was.

"Leave me alone, Potter. Just because you've tied first place with Krum, it's no reason for you to get cocky." Cedric's slightly annoyed voice snapped back as he walked out of the tent, causing Harry to snigger in response.

Before Harry could say anything else, he was surprised when it wasn't Madame Pomfrey who walked into the room but Hermione, who had an ecstatic, brightly glowing smile on her pretty face.

"Granger! Wha-What are you doing back here?!" Harry asked in surprise as Hermione excitedly gave him a friendly hug, still grinning from ear to ear.

"Back to Granger, now are we, Harry? I thought we were on first-name terms now." Hermione said softly, giving him a smile.

Harry tried to squelch back the smile that was fighting to break out on his face as well but gave in, returning a smile at the other girl. "Sorry, *Hermione*...I guess that came out of old habit." He answered sheepishly, shrugging as he looked at her in confusion.

"Anyway, what are you doing here? I thought everyone else had gone back up to school by this time." Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

Hermione blushed, looking away. "Well... We are but Madame Pomfrey had asked me to help with the healing of the champions so I'm here... I'm rather good with healing spells you know." She said, smiling.

Harry snorted rudely, not being able to prevent his Slytherin instincts as he shot her a snobbish sneer. "Figures... You don't have to shove your magical abilities in my face, I know you Gryffindors have a nasty habit of showing off their lame abilities." Harry said mockingly.

Hermione's eyes blazed in surprise and anger.

"Harry, that was a really rude thing to say! I didn't mean it like that and you know it, you insensitive jerk!" She snapped back as she tried to turn away but Harry grabbed her arm, pulling her back to face him.

"Damn, Hermione, I'm... I'm *sorry*, I didn't mean that, it just slipped out... I guess it's my old habits once again... These hasty comebacks come naturally to a Slytherin like me..." Harry said, looking down in guilt.

Hermione's eyes were as wide as saucers now. *Merlin, apologizing is becoming quite a thing for Harry now... That was the second time that he apologized to me...* She thought, shaking her head.

Harry's eyes twinkled in humor as he looked at her shaking head, raising an eyebrow at her in question. "What's with the shaking of the head? Did I sound that lame?" He asked, giving her a wry smile.

Hermione laughed at him, rolling her eyes. "Only slightly..." She teased as Harry scowled at her in mock anger.

Then, as though she had only noticed it at that very moment, Hermione's eyes widened in absolute shock as she caught sight of the Harry's bloody shoulder and slightly torn robes.

"*Fucking hell*, Harry! You're a mess!" Hermione exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock and worry as she began applying purple liquid onto Harry's cut shoulder.

*Hermione swears?!* Harry thought in amusement, chuckling to himself as he briefly caught the hand she was using to apply purple liquid onto his robes, causing the girl's eyes to meet his.

"I do believe I'm beginning to rub off on you, Hermione... And I rather like it..." Harry said softly, giving her hand a gentle kiss on the palm.

Hermione flushed dark red, nervously pulling her hand away from Harry, pretending to be engrossed in trying to move his torn robes to reveal the shallow cut on his shoulder. Noticing that the girl's hands were shaking, Harry let a soft smile cross his lips as he gently moved her hands away, winking at her.

"Allow me, Hermione." He said easily, momentarily standing up to peel off his black robes, revealing a lean, firm, well-muscled chest, a long, shallow cut slightly visible extending from his left shoulder.

Hermione squelched the squeak that had threatened to escape her as she nervously began applying the purple liquid to cleanse the wound, her hands slight shaking, making Harry give her a small, knowing smile.

"Relax, Hermione... I thought you said you were an expert on these things." He said, holding back a chuckle as Hermione nearly dropped the bottle she still held in her hand.

"I-I am, Harry...Quit being such a prat." Hermione hissed, giving him a mild glare.

Harry just smirked back in reply as Hermione put away the bottle of purple liquid before she took out her wand and pointed it at Harry's cut, taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself.

Harry let out a breath of relief when he felt the stinging cut seal up, relieving him of the pain in his shoulder as he tried to stand up but Hermione held up a hand to stop him, looking intently at his shoulder.

"Harry... What's that behind your shoulder?" She asked, her eyes narrowing in curiosity as she walked behind him and gently pointed out a mark behind his shoulder.

Harry turned his head and saw what had made Hermione stare like that. Just behind his shoulder, he saw a small, serpent shaped mark standing out against the pale of his skin, looking like it had been there for years.

The mark itself was black but it took the shape of a serpent which had coiled around upwards a long sword, its head at the tip of the sword.

Harry looked at it in surprise, fingering the mark to make sure if it was really marked onto his skin.

"I... I don't know... I guess it's a birthmark that I never seemed to notice before..." Harry said in awe, eyes wide with surprise. Hermione eyed him carefully, raising an eyebrow. "So you mean to tell me, you never saw this *birthmark* on your own body before now?" She asked incredulously.

Harry shook his head, waving it off. "It's nothing, Hermione, it's fine! It's probably just some fake mark my housemates put on me or something while I was asleep. Nothing to worry about...It happens all the time." He said carelessly, throwing his robe back on much to Hermione's relief.

"Does it?" She asked suspiciously, raising an eyebrow at him again.

"Yeah, like last year, I woke up to find that one of my girl housemates had given me a hickey on the neck! Disturbing really but still I found it rather surprising and I wasn't expecting—"

"Okay, Harry... Too much information already." Hermione interrupted, burning deep red yet her eyes flashing in indignation.

Harry smirked, cupping her cheek gently with his hands. "That was a long time ago, though, Mione... I was just teasing you." He said lightly, smiling.

"Anyway, Harry, I think I may have to warn you about Parvati." Hermione said hastily, changing the subject as she pulled herself away from him, gathering up the medical bottles in the tent.

Harry tried not to roll his eyes and sneer at the mention of the Gryffindor girl. "What about the little bitch?" He asked disdainfully, running a hand through his hair. Hermione flinched at the harshness of his tone but turned around to face him again, her facial expression serious.

"Well, I think you really hurt her but from what I can see, she is still going to try everything in her power to get you back... She wants you that badly Harry and I'm thinking you have to watch out because she

might resort to drastic measures to do just that.” She explained carefully but Harry just snorted, waving it aside again.

“Nothing new that I can’t handle... I’m not so worried about it, it’s not like I haven’t faced an overly obsessive, delusional woman before anyway. She wasn’t the first.” He said arrogantly, earning him an annoyed glare from Hermione.

*Oh god! How could I possibly like someone who is ‘this’ conceited?!* Hermione thought to herself in irritation. “Your modesty overwhelms me, Potter.” Hermione said sarcastically, rolling her eyes at him.

Harry laughed, taking her hand in his again. “Back to Potter, I see.... I’ll take it that when you use my last name, you’re pissed off at me and may I ask why?” He asked, looking amused.

Hermione gave him a flat, pointed look. “Because though we are on a truce now and are on friendly terms, I still cannot change the fact that you are, and will always be, a conceited, Slytherin git, no matter what happens.” She snapped irritably.

“Ah but you forget, my dear lady, I am a *drop dead gorgeous* Slytherin git.” Harry supplied, winking at her as he bent down and kissed her hand again, making Hermione smile in spite of herself.

“Alright, you’re a *cute* Slytherin git, I’ll give you that.” She admitted, her lips quirking into a small, sideways smile.

Harry’s facial features softened as he stood up and gave Hermione a gentle, yet affectionate kiss on her cheek, stroking where he had kissed her with his thumb.

“Hey, Hermione, you have to forgive me for all these sudden jerkish outbursts of mine so if ever they do happen, please just ignore it... It’s something I can’t prevent anymore. I would never want to hurt you in any way by my old words and habits.” Harry whispered to her softly, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear for her.

Hermione’s breath caught temporarily in her throat as Harry sighed, tightening his hand around hers.

"I wouldn't want to hurt you once again with things I don't really mean, you just have to excuse me every time... I believe I owe you so much more affection after all you've done for me, Hermione... You're quite special to me, you know... You're not like those other girls." He murmured, his lips briefly brushing against her soft cheek as he spoke.

Hermione closed her eyes, leaning against his strong embrace as he leaned in again, his lips slightly touching her ear. "I can tell..." He whispered, his voice barely audible.

Hermione barely had time to react when she saw Harry begin to lean forward towards her again, his emerald eyes trained on her soft lips as he did, which caused her to pull away in nervousness, shakily whirling around to distract herself by fixing up the medicinal potions again, not seeing the amused smile Harry was giving her from behind.

"So! Um, Harry, I almost forgot to congratulate you on your incredible victory out there! You were bloody fantastic! I have to say, I'm really proud of you! You were easily the best there was." Hermione commented hastily, trying to stray away the subject once again.

Harry laughed, sitting back down on the stool as he crossed his arms over his chest, smiling at her, a warm, cute blush surprisingly creeping up to his cheeks. "Thanks, Hermione, you really think so?" He asked, trying to hide his blush.

Hermione gave him a lopsided, rather shy, grin, rolling her eyes.

"No questions asked, Harry. You were magnificent! I was cheering for you, the whole time and you looked great out there! Really confident and courageous...A real champion, I'd say... I bet your housemates must all be really proud of you right now." She commented, facing him with a warm smile.

"Yeah, well I couldn't have done it without your help Hermione..." He said gratefully, making the girl blush as well at the way he was staring at her.



He smiled, unknowingly making Hermione's heart do flip-flops in her chest as she nearly dropped the bottles she was arranging, hastily trying to keep them within her arms.

"Here, let me help you with that." Harry offered, jumping up and taking the bottles from her overloaded hands, unknowingly sending an electrical static through Hermione's arm as his hand brushed against hers.

Startled, Hermione let out a squeak, immediately forgetting about the bottles as she accidentally dropped them all at the same time in shock, causing Harry to hurriedly yank his wand out.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" He muttered hastily, causing the medicine bottles to float in mid-air, neatly setting themselves on the table again in an arranged and orderly manner.

Hermione let out a faint laugh, more out of nervousness and desperation than anything else.

Harry looked curiously at her. "What?"

She shook her head, still laughing lightly. "I just remembered this thing in first year when I was teaching Ron how to do that spell... It took him a long time to learn and we got into a fight afterwards about it..." She explained.

Harry's eyes sparkled at the memory, laughing along in amusement with her. "Yeah, I suppose the Weasel had a hard time learning such a simple spell... What a loser.." He mocked, sneering.

Hermione shot him a sharp look.

"Harry, stop that! Speaking of which, that reminds me about something I've been meaning to ask you, how exactly are we supposed to tell our friends about our truce?" She asked him sharply, looking at him.

Harry looked back at her blankly with a dark glint in his eyes, as though he didn't want to answer the question she had just asked.

"Please answer me, Harry." Hermione said quietly, looking intently at him.

Harry seemed to have what looked like an inner argument with himself before he sighed and dropped his head in his hands, taking a deep breath. "We don't." He answered flatly, looking away.

"What do you mean, we don't?! Harry, they have a right to know! Is it alright for you for us to be friends when the different groups we hang around with are still at each other's throats?!" Hermione raged, obviously offended by his words.

"Well what the fuck do you want us to do, Hermione?! Try and bring the two groups together for us to make peace and then everyone is all smiles and happy?! Try to get our friends to merge with each other, is that it?! Get the Slytherins and Gryffindors to get along as one big, happy family just because the two of us decided to have a truce?!" Harry burst out, narrowing his eyes.

"We could try, Harry! I've had enough of this foolish rivalry in the first place! If we can get along now, then so can our friends! All we have to do is get them to try—"

"Hermione! Think about what you are saying! That will never happen! Never! And you know what else? I don't *want* it to happen either! No damn way! My friends would never accept it and neither can I." Harry said coldly.

Hermione's jaw dropped open in disbelief. "So how is it you can accept *me* but not accept my friends?" She asked him bitterly, turning her back on him, holding back tears.

Silence dawned between the two of them for a while before Harry sighed, breaking the tension, as he walked up to Hermione, putting gentle hands on her shoulders from behind.

"Hermione... Just try to understand me here... There are just too many things different about our worlds right now... Trying to be openly friends to each other in front of everyone will only cause up a stir... Both our houses will question us about it and that's something I don't want to face right now." He explained.

Hermione sniffed but nodded to let him know that she understood. "So... What are you saying, Harry?" She asked him quietly.

Harry let out another breath of frustration as he rested his chin on her shoulder, causing Hermione to stiffen in slight discomfort and shock.

"What I'm saying is... I think we should keep our friendship a secret for now. We can't afford to be all civil and friendly towards each other in front of our friends, it would shock them all greatly... Let's say we keep this to ourselves, huh?" He asked.

Hermione blinked, sadly nodding her head in reluctant agreement. Though she didn't want to admit it, Harry was right... They can't act all buddy-buddy with each in front of everyone... It would raise up a lot of serious questions and just thinking about explaining herself to her housemates gave her an intense headache.

"We can be like secret friends." Hermione said, offering a weak smile.

"Exactly... And no one would know but us... For now, anyway... We just have to keep this to ourselves. We're the only ones who seem to get along anyway and you're the only Gryffindor I like spending my time with. Just because I accept you, it doesn't necessarily mean I have to accept your loser friends now, do I?" Harry said lightly, giving her a reckless grin.

"My friends are not losers, Harry..." Came the muffled, irritated reply.

"They are too, Hermione... I don't know how you can stand it so much... You deserve so much better, I don't even know why you bother hanging around with them so much." Harry scoffed, sniggering.

Hermione let out a defeated sigh, silently agreeing as she pulled away from him, giving him a feeble smile once again.

"Hey, uh, just to tell you, I really thought the way you stunned that dragon after your task was incredible. You really knocked him out at the very last second... What spell did you use anyway?" Hermione commented, trying to ease the tension in the tent between them.

Harry's eyes darkened dangerously as he snapped his head away from hers, not meeting her gaze. "Thank you." Was the rather cold, harsh reply from the Slytherin, who had directly avoided the question she had asked him.

"Is something wrong?" Hermione asked him in concern, fusing her eyebrows together as she placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Harry turned and gave her a false smile, nodding rather hastily.

"Nothing, Mione. Everything is fine, I just—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence as Harry cringed and let out a light hiss at the sudden stinging of his leg, stumbling back onto the stool as he clutched his left leg in pain.

"Harry! What's wrong?!" Hermione asked in alarm, her eyes glistening with worry and fear as she bent over to check his leg.

Harry shut his eyes, trying to hold back the pain as Hermione checked the part on his leg where a deeper gash had been, blood still flowing freely from the open wound.

"Oh gods, Harry, why didn't you tell me you had a deeper wound on your leg?" Hermione asked, taking in a sharp intake of breath as she hastily began applying the same purple liquid onto the bleeding cut.

"I didn't know, Granger!" Harry suddenly slapped in annoyance, his anger getting the better of him before he bit back his tongue when he saw Hermione's eyes flash dangerously at him in righteous anger.

Hermione didn't say anything, holding her anger in as she muttered a quick healing spell on his leg, healing the wound up completely before she turned abruptly, about to walk away.

Seeing her hurt and offended look, Harry sighed suddenly and stood up, wrapping his arms around her to prevent her from walking away.

"Take your hands off me, Potter." Hermione said flatly.

"I never do seem to learn, do I?" He asked, his voice dripping with slight amusement as he turned her around to face his warm smile. Hermione kept silent, but seeing the small bruise on his cheek, she let out a small smile, giving him a brief kiss on the dark spot of skin.

"Yes, you never do seem to... You should start learning how to control your temper, Harry..." She said softly, stroking his cheek where she had kissed him.

Harry let out a laugh, smirking as he turned away. "So they all tell me..." He whispered under his breath.

Hermione actually smirked, pulling away from him. "Are there any more wounds or bruises you forgot to tell me?" She asked sharply.

Harry looked at her blankly for a minute before he let out an impish smile, nodding silently with a strangely innocent look in his eyes. "That depends... Are you going to kiss it better, Hermione?" He asked, dropping his voice to a mere whisper.

Hermione felt a warm flush on her cheeks as Harry gently tilted her face up to meet his, stroking her cheek with his thumb as his intense, emerald-green eyes inspected her own very intently and carefully, as though he was trying to memorize every feature of her face.

The two stood in absolute silence as only their rapidly growing breathing could be heard in the stillness of the tent, both of them studying each other's faces with a mixture of different emotions running through them.

His breathing was unexpectedly coming in short, small gasps as he tried to keep his lips from claiming her own though his face was barely inches part from hers.

"H-Hermione?" He asked breathlessly, his eyes glazing over, slightly unfocused.

Hermione's own breath caught in her throat as her eyes fluttered shut in anticipation, Harry's lips now just ghosting over hers. "Y-yes, Harry?" She whispered, squelching the gasp that had almost escaped her and she felt her heart now rapidly beating against her chest.

"C-can I k-kiss...Can I kiss y-you?" He whispered desperately, his voice slightly cracking as it expressed the pleading he felt at the moment.

Hermione answered him by initiating the kiss herself, closing the distance between them by pressing her own lips firmly against his, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer.

Harry's eyes widened in surprise but it shut almost immediately as he encircled his arms around her waist, deepening their kiss, sending both of their heads spinning in absolute exhilaration.

He felt his knees weakening as his lips caressed hers gently yet with so much passion that he had never felt before, making his heart pound dangerously against his chest

Though the kiss was not as aggressive as the others he had had before... It held much more passion and emotions that he had never experienced from any other kiss in the past... And... Harry had to admit it to even himself... It was much better than he had ever felt before...

Just as Hermione's hands had entangled themselves in his silky raven hair, Harry had moved a hand behind her neck, massaging it gently, making Hermione squirm in discomfort.

*Never knew she was ticklish...* Harry thought in amusement, making Hermione tremble slightly in his arms. *I never knew a single kiss could feel as good as this... Could hold this much passion...* Harry realized, shaking slightly.

"*Ahem...*"

The couple sprang apart, Hermione blushing profusely and Harry looking slightly annoyed and irritated as they saw Draco standing in the doorway of the cubicle, an impressed, amused smirk on his face.

"Am I interrupting, anything, Potter?" He asked, sniggering slightly, making Hermione go an interesting shade of red.

"No, nothing at all, *Malfoy*." Harry muttered, gritting his teeth as Hermione composed herself, shaking her head.

"Well, I had better go now, Har, I mean *Potter*." She stopped herself from saying Harry's first name out loud, shooting a look over at Draco, who still had a smug smile on his face as he watched them from the tent entrance.

Harry nodded, masking himself as he threw her a conceited sneer, raising an eyebrow. "You should, Granger. The Weasel and the Leprechaun might be looking for you." He said snidely, running a hand through his hair.

Hermione was taken back slightly in offense but seeing the look in Harry's eyes, she saw that he was just covering up, so she glared back, shaking her head as she began gathering the medicine bottles again.

"Sod off, Potter." She hissed, looking at him. Harry gave her a secret smile, yanking her arm to get her to face him for him to whisper something in her ear.

"I'll see you on Saturday, Granger... I can't wait..." He whispered softly, secretly brushing his lips against her soft cheek for a moment before he pulled back abruptly as though he had been stung, giving her a haughty look.

Hermione hastily made her way out of the tent, passing by Draco, who gave her a knowing sneer again, stepping out of her way as she walked out of the cubicle.

Harry turned to glare at Draco as he plopped himself down beside him, the self-satisfied smirk still evident on his face.

"Well, well, Harry... It seems I have underestimated your so-called talent and skills after all... I just came here to congratulate you myself when—"

"Where's my sister?" Harry interrupted, trying to change the subject hastily.

"AJ and Blaise both snuck out to Hogsmeade to buy some refreshments for the Slytherin celebration party later tonight. She's ecstatic about how you did that task out there, Harry." Draco answered, shrugging.

"How were they able to sneak out?" Harry asked curiously again.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Marauder's Map, duh." He retorted, indicating the map he and Harry had stolen from the Weasley twins in their third year after seeing the two use it in the corridors one night.

Before Harry could say anything, Draco rounded on him again, giving him a sharp look.

"From what I can see, Harry, I believe I may have to start planning out the things I have to give you when you win the bet.. It seems your skills are finally winning..... I'm impressed... You're actually improving Harry..." He commented casually.

Harry didn't say anything, looking down at his shoes.

"You even have Hermione Gryffindor-good-girl Granger fooled into believing she loves you... Your greatness amazes me Harry...When I first gave you this dare, I never thought that you would actually succeed in getting Hermione to believe you love her but I was wrong...Could you inform me when you drop the news on the mudblood so I can see the entertaining reaction on her face when you do?" Draco asked, laughing maliciously.

Harry just looked away, avoiding Draco's eyes so he couldn't see the guilt and pain that his own were showing as he hanged his head down in shame, glaring at the floor. *Damn it... My eyes seem to be betraying me more often... I have to stop exposing my emotions or I'll become weak!* He thought angrily, clenching his hands into tight fists.

"How did you manage to do it, Harry? I thought for sure that the mudblood was one tough case that you were never going to crack... What lies did you give her this time and when's the so-called lucky night you plan to seduce her so you can end this stupid fiasco?! Seeing you pretending to like Granger is making me sick...." Draco ranted on, still smirking.



Harry took in a sharp intake of breath, turning away again since he couldn't bear the pride and malice in his best friend's face. "Shut up, Malfoy. I don't want to talk about it right now. I'm not in the mood, leave me alone." Harry snapped coldly, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Draco's eyes widened as he looked at him in surprise, his eyebrows raised up in disbelief and shock. "Harry... No, she's... She's really getting to you isn't she?" He asked directly, looking at his best friend directly in the eye.

Harry looked at the floor... The stool...His hands... Anywhere but Draco's accusing glare.

*"Isn't she?!"* Draco demanded.

Harry looked up at him, forcing out a shallow laugh as he rolled his eyes, pretending to be amused by the idea. *"Granger?!"* Of course not, Draco! Are you fucking crazy?! I could never like a Gryffindor mudblood anyway... I'm just doing this because of the dare so you had better be prepared to lose." Harry forced out, giving his best friend a sneer to convince him.

Draco didn't look convinced though as he narrowed his eyes at him. "You had better be sure, Harry..." He said quietly.

"Hell, no, Draco, of course not... I... I don't like Granger! It just surprisingly developed into an infatuation I guess... I just never thought I would actually enjoy seducing her but she's actually worth playing around with... It's not like I'm falling in love with the girl or anything..." He stammered, running a shaky hand through his hair.

*Right?!* He asked himself but he ignored it.

Draco merely raised an eyebrow at him. "Just as long as you remember the terms of our bet, Harry... The terms were that you get Granger to fall in love with *you*...Not the other way around..." He said darkly.

Harry forced out another laugh. "Of course, I do! What do you think of me, a fool? I know what I'm doing Draco, relax, I can handle this just fine." He assured, more to himself than to Draco.

Draco sighed, standing up from where he sat and giving him a look of concern.

"I'm warning you Harry... Don't get too close to the girl... It will only end in trouble and more complications... Slytherins do NOT fall for Gryffindors... We can't afford to... Never have, never will... Our worlds are just too far apart... Do yourselves both a favor and control your feelings for the mudblood. Take my word for it." Draco said softly, patting Harry on the back.

"By the way, congratulations, Harry... You have made Slytherin house very proud. You were great out there." Draco said, giving him a grin, offering his hand, which Harry took weakly, giving him their secret handshake again.

"I'll see you at the Slytherin party, Harry." Draco said, nodding before he walked out of the cubicle, leaving Harry to his thoughts in silence

The young raven-haired Slytherin stood there for a long time, thinking.

*I know what the hell am I doing... I'm still in control of myself... Right?* He asked himself, sighing before he stood up and finally walked out of the tent, heading on back up to Hogwarts, his golden egg now tucked firmly under his arm.

"Congratulations, Harry!! I'm so proud of you, jerk-face!" AJ squealed as Harry entered the Slytherin Common Room to find a big mass of green and silver streamers and decorations in the large room, all his housemates proudly waiting for him as he entered.

All sorts of food and drinks were on a large table in the middle of the room in front of the fireplace as people looked up and greeted the popular Slytherin. Harry couldn't help laughing as AJ launched herself onto him, hugging him as tight as she could before she scowled, leaning over to whisper something in his ear.

"If you ever scare me like that again, I'll kill you... You nearly gave me a heart attack, Harry! You could have seriously gotten hurt!" She said softly, her eyes softening in concern.

Harry gave her a reassuring smile, patting her cheek affectionately. "Well, don't worry too much about me, sis... You know I'm made of steel anyway. And I told you I'd conquer that task, didn't I? " He said, winking.

AJ laughed, hugging him tightly again before she planted a kiss on his cheek. "I was just scared that I might lose you to that dragon... Ask Blaise, he literally had to hold onto me to keep me from running into that enclosure to help you out..." She said sheepishly.

Harry smiled at her, ruffling her hair as Blaise rushed forward as well, handing Harry a bottle of butterbeer as he gave both Potter twins a grin. "You should have seen her, Harry. She was struggling with me so much that I had to stun her to keep her from running into the task." He said, shaking his head.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm as he grabbed a fistful of Blaise's robes and lifted him from the ground, making AJ laugh despite the situation. "You did *what?! She could have gotten hurt, you bastard!*" He growled, his eyes glinting.

Blaise' eyes widened as well but in intimidation but he couldn't prevent the grin that had spread on his face as his feet dangled from the floor. "That's okay, I caught her anyway, Potter." Draco drawled, sneaking up behind them with a self-satisfied smile on his face.

AJ turned beet red, giving Draco an angry glare before she muttered something and walked off just as Harry set Blaise back down on the floor.

Before Harry could ask Draco about it, the Slytherins all flanked around him, congratulating him, making Draco step aside and roll his eyes, watching as the seventh year girls all gathered around his best friend, repeatedly kissing him one by one in turn.

When they had all cleared and had begun to spread around the large common room, helping themselves to the butterbeer and food around, Harry walked back to his best friend, his face smothered with lipstick marks.

Draco tore his gaze away from where AJ was laughing and drinking along with some other Slytherin to sneer at his best friend, who looked completely hassled as he plopped down on the armchairs beside him as the other Slytherins partied around the room.

“Hard to be popular and handsome at the same time, huh?” Draco asked, earning him a grin from Harry, who shrugged arrogantly, laughing as he took a long swig of his butterbeer.

“Oh yeah, why do you still have that egg?” Draco asked, pointing at the egg under Harry’s arm.

Harry turned to look at it in surprise, as though he had just noticed he was holding it just then. “Oh, well, just as I was coming back up here, Bagman told me that the egg is a clue to what we’ll be facing in the next task, which I don’t have to worry about yet since it’s still in two months anyway.” Harry said, shrugging as he tossed the egg over to Draco.

Draco caught it and peered at it curiously. “Well, let’s open it and see exactly what’s inside.” He said, tossing it back to Harry.

Harry winced as the heavy egg hit him but rolling his eyes, he pried open the egg. Almost immediately, the Common Room was filled with a loud, screechy wailing, sounding similar to a scream of a banshee as everyone furiously put their hands on their ears to block out the scream.

“Shut that damn egg, Potter!!” Draco yelled, his own hands over his ears. Harry shut the empty egg hastily as the students around them sighed in relief, shaking their heads in annoyance and irritation.

“What the fuck was that?! Do you have to face a *banshee* or something?!” Blaise exclaimed, walking over and taking the egg from Harry to inspect it just as the other Slytherin boys joined them, sitting in a circle around the popular Slytherin duo with bottles of butterbeer in their hands.

“Nah, I’m thinking you might have to knock Pansy up to get her shrieking and screeching like that.” Draco said derisively, making the Slytherin boys all laugh, smirking in amusement.

Harry couldn't help laughing as well as he shrugged again, leaning back against the armchair to relax himself, shooting a reckless grin at the guys around him.

"Nothing I have to worry about at the moment.. Right now, let's just drink the night away, eh? About time we guys had some time to ourselves without any annoying women around us." Harry suggested, raising an eyebrow.

"Looks like your twin had the same idea about us." Matt, another Slytherin sixth year, said, nodding to AJ, who was now drinking and giggling along with the girls across the room.

They all laughed, shaking their heads before they all raised their bottles and took a long sip, making Harry momentarily forget about what had happened.

*I have to talk to Draco about the whole killing curse thing though...* Harry thought to himself before he took another sip, forgetting all about Dumbledore's request not to tell him.

**A/N: Hope you liked the edited parts!** Ok now that I gave you guys a bit of **Draco/AJ** in this chapter, I am giving you a **Ron/AJ** scene in the next one which I think you will all enjoy especially since we have a **drunk AJ** on our hands... **PLEASE REVIEW!! Ciao! MWAH!**

## Chapter 15- Stolen Kisses

AJ groaned as she clumsily tried to stand up from her seat in the Slytherin Common Room hours later, Pansy, Lila and all the other girls still giggling like crazy with butterbeer bottles clasped tightly in their hands.

"I think I've had enough, you guys..." AJ mumbled, stumbling back onto the armchair as the whole room around her began to spin around her in circles.

"Nonsense, Potter! Go on! Have another one!" Lila persuaded, shoving another new bottle of butterbeer towards the raven-haired girl, who in turn, took it reluctantly and forced another sip.

AJ set the bottle down from her lips and took a look around the room around her. She saw the most of the guys, including Harry and Draco, huddled in front of the fireplace, laughing boisterously, obviously all drunk.

*Ooh... My head...* She thought, groaning again as she rested her head back against the headrest of the armchair, grimacing as the girls around her all burst out into hysterical giggles again.

"Okay, who here agrees that Harry is the hottest guy to come to Hogwarts since James Potter himself?" Pansy giggled, taking another long swig from her bottle and somehow managing to stain the front of her robes.

Without knowing why, AJ burst out into hysterical giggles as well, earning her an annoyed and indignant glare from Pansy.

Pansy gave her a scowl but it didn't have the usual effect since her face was currently dazed and unfocused, her cheeks beginning to flush deep crimson.

"Well?!" Pansy snapped, hiccupping as she did. "Whoever agrees, raise your hand!" She ordered, hiccupping again but grinning at the circle of girls around them.

Every girl in the circle eagerly raised their hand as AJ just looked at them in annoyance, raising an eyebrow before she merely took another sip of butterbeer, sighing in exasperation.

“He’s my brother, I just don’t see him that way.” AJ simply relief, shrugging with a smirk on her lips.

Lila snorted, rolling her eyes as the other girls looked at AJ in question.

“You don’t see *anyone* that way. I swear, you’re almost as geeky as Granger, sometimes, Potter.” Lila mocked, sneering snobbishly at her.

AJ just glared at her darkly, slowly setting the bottle of butterbeer down on the table in front of her before she slowly set her face into a hideous snarl, her hands clenching dangerously.

“Just *what* do you mean by that, Perrine?” AJ asked calmly though her eyes betrayed her calmness as they showed blazing emerald-orbs filled with annoyance and spite.

“Exactly what I said... No offense and all but from what I can see, you really have no life at all or at least... If I may point out, ever since our first year, you have *never* gone out on a date with a guy or even dated *anyone* at all. I never saw you with *anyone*, it’s pathetic.” Lila drawled again, giggling and not fully aware of what she was saying as she drank some more butterbeer, obviously way drunk.

“She’s right, AJ... Why don’t you try going out for a change? I mean, among all us Slytherin girls in the upper years, you seem to be the only one not interested in relations with the opposite sex.” Fiona, a Slytherin seventh-year, pointed out.

AJ flushed red but not out of embarrassment but out of anger, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Is it a crime *not* to be dating anyone yet?” She mumbled, looking away from their stares.

“Well, not exactly but in Slytherin house, however, it seems extremely out of the ordinary.” Dana, one of Draco’s ex-girlfriends, reasoned, giggling.

“Yeah, AJ, you’re a very pretty girl, why don’t you put your beauty to good use like we do?” Pansy quipped, giggling and hiccupping at the same time as Lila nodded next to her, beaming.

AJ couldn’t help giving the other girl a taunting smirk, a smug look appearing on her face. “Be like *you*?! But, I don’t want to be a slut! No way, do you even have any idea how your reputation is like?” She sneered, sniggering.

This time, Pansy and Lila both flushed red while the other girls laughed in agreement, shaking their heads at the sight.

“What do you *mean*?! Pansy and I are the girlfriends of the two hottest boys in school!” Lila screeched, scowling as AJ laughed even harder, hurling the now empty bottle of butterbeer across the room to crash against the wall.

AJ took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, before she turned and sneered at them again, barely able to control another round of hysterics that was threatening to overcome her.

“Do you girls want to know what guys actually think of you two?” AJ asked, hiding her giggles behind her hand as she tried to shakily stand up again, gripping onto the armrest of her armchair to support her as the room spun around her dangerously.

“W-What?” Pansy dared to ask, narrowing her eyes at the raven-haired girl in front of her.

AJ giggled again, her face flushing from being drunk as Fiona only managed to help her from falling onto the floor by grabbing her arm and steadying her back firmly on the ground.

She walked unsteadily to the middle of the circle, pointing a misdirected finger at Pansy and Lila, who both looked at her as if she had grown an extra head as AJ tried to get the words of her story out, stuttering as she fought to keep from laughing.

“H-Harry told me some guy wrote b-both your n-names on one of the Quidditch shower stalls with the w-writings, ‘*Looking to blow off time? Call Pansy and Lila, open-legged twenty four hours a day!*’ She



exclaimed, sending their whole group into hysterics again as Pansy and Lila glared at each other in humiliation.

AJ giggled harder, stumbling onto the floor sloppily but it didn't seem to affect her as it only made her laugh even harder as she got up and sat back down on her seat, clutching herself from laughing too hard.

Fiona, who had an amused smile on her face, leaned over to whisper something to the Slytherin girl. "Did your twin really say that?" She asked in a hushed voice.

AJ smirked back, leaning to answer the other girl's question. "No but they don't have to know that just yet." She whispered back giving the older girl a grin before turning back to the laughing group.

Pansy and Lila were both looking at her in anger, scowling in humiliation at the other girl in front of them.

"Yeah?! Well at least we're not plain pathetic like you are! At least, unlike you, we're no longer virg—" AJ jumped up and clamped her hand over Lila's mouth before she was able to say anything that would embarrass her, blushing slightly.

All the girls gasped as AJ scowled, yanking another bottle of butterbeer from the drawer and gulping it down to prevent herself from talking.

"AJ! I can't believe it! I would never have thought that *you*—" Dana never got to finish her sentence as AJ looked up at her, eyes flashing maliciously with a sneer on her face, her middle finger raised up in the air directed at the other girl.

The gesture alone was enough to indicate that they should all shut up before AJ lost her temper as Dana shut her mouth immediately, instead, glaring at AJ in annoyance.

Before anyone else could say anything, AJ just plopped back down on her seat, taking out another bottle of butterbeer from their stock and starting to gulp it down like a boy, not caring of the other girls looked at her in shock.

“The hell are you all staring at?!” She growled, glaring at them in anger.

The girls shrugged to themselves before they all began drinking up again, another conversation starting up amongst them as AJ relaxed visibly, a self-satisfied smile forming on her face.

After several more agitating minutes, AJ finally hurled her last bottle of butterbeer across the room and stood up, the other Slytherin girls not noticing as she began making her way towards her brother, who looked like he was in a serious conversation with Draco, both of them whispering in secret.

“Harry, what the fuck?! How the bloody hell were you able to perform that spell—” Draco’s voice trailed off immediately as he saw AJ approaching them, her pace slightly unsteady.

“Harry?” AJ asked, coming over to plop herself on her brother’s lap as he ruffled her hair in response.

Harry gave his sister an expectant look, giving Draco a look which indicated the other boy to shut up. Draco just smirked, shrugging before taking another sip of his butterbeer. Unlike AJ, he and Harry were pretty much used to drinking a lot of bottles of butterbeer already that it took quite a while for them to get really drunk.

*Looks like AJ doesn’t even understand what she’s saying...* He thought in amusement, smiling as he watched AJ look around the room in a daze again, her eyes looking strangely unfocused.

“I’m just going to walk around outside okay? I need a breath of fresh air...” She said, trying to stand up again but only ending up stumbling into Draco’s lap this time, making the blonde give an uncharacteristic squeak in surprise.

AJ and Harry both looked at Draco in shock before bursting out into hysterics, making Draco turn an interesting shade of red as AJ drunkenly got off him, playfully pinching his cheek as she did.

“Trust me, Malfoy, mouse squeaks do *not* suit *ferrets* like you.” AJ said, still laughing as she headed off towards the exit of the Common

Room, Harry still giving Draco a smirk which the blonde Slytherin gladly returned by raising his middle finger up at him with a glare.

AJ was still chuckling to herself as she exited the Common Room and began dizzily making her way through the Slytherin corridors, not knowing where she was going until she crashed into a suit of armor, falling back onto the cold floor with a loud thud.

Giggling at herself and yet, AJ stood up and looked at the offending suit of armor maliciously with her hands on her hips, her spinning vision making the suit of armor indistinguishable.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going, you blind jerk!” She snapped stupidly, kicking the suit of armor irritably. It took awhile for the pain to register as AJ’s eyes suddenly widened in pain and she began hopping around on one foot, clutching her other injured foot in pain.

“Ow!! That hurt!” AJ whined to no one in particular, still clutching her foot as she attempted to walk away but unfortunately, it must have slipped her mind that she only had one foot to walk with so she ended up flat on her rear end, her eyes looking ten years younger as she glanced around her in confusion.

Scratching her head, AJ untangled her own limbs and tried to pick herself up from the floor but it only resulted in her tumbling back down on it, this time, giggling to herself again.

*Merlin... Maybe I shouldn't have had those extra butterbeer bottles...* She thought, shrugging before she finally made it to her feet, walking down the corridor in silence. After a long silent moment of endless walking, AJ stopped abruptly, looking around the corridors in confusion.

Scratching her head, AJ attempted to turn around hastily but ended up turning in a full 360 degree circle before she let out a yelp and landed right on her bottom again on the floor, groaning as she clutched her aching head.

“Oh... My head...” She cursed to herself, blinking up as she noticed that she was no longer on familiar Slytherin territory. Frowning, she

scrambled up and looked around, her eyes widening as she took in the colors around her. There was no doubt about it... Somehow, she had led herself right into Gryffindor territory.

*Where was I going in the first place?!* She asked herself, scrunching up her face as she tried to remember why she had stepped out of the common room.

Sighing, AJ walked a couple more steps before she shrugged and settled herself down on the floor against the wall in a fetal position, burying her head in her hands in an attempt to stop the room from spinning.

*Ugh... Now I know why I don't like to drink...* She thought to herself, groaning again as she tried to squelch the uneasy churning of her stomach and the way her mind seemed to be throbbing in pain every time she moved her head.

Blinking, she yawned and looked around the spinning Gryffindor corridors. She had to admit, it was much more welcoming and warm than the cold atmosphere of the Slytherin dungeons... Much more comforting to be exact...

*Although...* She smirked to herself as an amusing thought came into her mind. She doubted that the Gryffindors would be that 'welcoming' when they saw her on their territory.

Chuckling slightly at the thought, AJ slowly got back up to her feet and dusted her robes, trying to figure out from which corridor she had come from. After three years of learning at Hogwarts, she still hadn't memorized the damn place and the fact that her head was still spinning was not helping at all.

Just as she was about to make her way to the corridor on her right, she heard heavy footsteps behind her, making her eyes go wide with fear. She made to walk away but she found that she was unable to move since her feet had suddenly frozen themselves on the floor.

*Who the bloody hell could that be at this hour?!* AJ thought in panic, her eyes frantically searching the dark corridor for a trace of

familiarity as the footsteps seemed to come closer and closer, heading right for her direction.

AJ squelched the gasp that had wanted to escape her and made a blind run down the corridor away from the footsteps, immediately increasing her speed when she heard the footsteps start to chase after her, becoming louder and louder.

“Damn!” She cursed as she forced her legs to run even faster, her heart beating very rapidly now as she tried to fight down the strong surge of fear that was dawning upon her.

*I have to get away from here! Where am I supposed to go?! How the—*

**WHAM!!**

She never got to finish her train of thought as she collided with a hard, brick wall, cursing out loud again and grimacing in pain as she lay sprawled for the fifth time that night on the cold floor, growling at herself.

*Great...Way to go, Potter... Crashing into a brick wall... Very smart.* She thought, scowling as she felt the room spin around her again even more this time, feeling a big, painful purple bruise begin to form on her throbbing head.

She was just about to get back up and run from the still approaching figure behind her when she stopped abruptly, briefly recognizing the hysterical, male laughter that was coming from the direction of the footsteps.

“P-Potter!! You ran into the wall!” Ron taunted, collapsing on the floor in a fit of hysterical laughter and childish sniggers.

AJ turned bright red but sneered at the boy, clutching her aching head as she dizzily tried to stand up. Groaning, she gave up and just sat there on the floor as the redhead continued to laugh on.

“Shut the hell up, Weasley! Grow up for a change, will you?!” She snapped indignantly, still an interesting shade of red from embarrassment.

This only made Ron laugh harder, pounding the floor with his fist as AJ growled and turned away, trying to hide the humiliation burning in her cheeks.

*Perfect... The night I'm drunk and lost and clumsy is the night I have to meet up with Ron and totally humiliate myself... Way to go, Potter* You're just way ahead of yourself now, aren't you?. AJ thought to herself, shaking her head.

She just glared at the laughing Gryffindor until his laughter had subsided, still grinning as he weakly got up from the floor, looking down at AJ with a taunting look on his face.

“Nice look Potter, give it a little more confusion and try scratching your head more often and you can actually look a lot more like Crabbe and Goyle.” Ron sniggered, surprisingly offering a hand to help the girl stand up.

AJ looked at the hand in surprise, her eyes widening in disbelief for a moment before she let out a wicked grin, taking the hand and carefully getting off the ground only to make Ron's breathing stopped momentarily as their faces were inches apart from where they stood.

Drunk and incredibly delusional, AJ gave Ron a sexy smile and wrapped her arms around him, seductively resting her head on the crook of the boy's neck. “Now since when did you care what I looked like?” She slurred, smirking to herself as she felt the redhead tense in her arms.

Ron froze for a minute, his eyes widening and his form tensing as the Slytherin snuggled herself into him, making his knees buckle weakly in surprise and pleasure at the same time.

*What the—* Ron thought as AJ mumbled something into his neck and pulled his form closer to hers, closing her eyes against him as Ron barely responded to the embrace, still too stunned to move.

*This is AJ Potter!! Slytherin enemy! What the bloody hell is she doing?!* He thought as he pushed her back as though she was on fire, making the girl exclaim in surprise, ungracefully stumbling back onto the cold floor.

"Ow... You bloody jerk!" She snapped, grimacing slightly in pain.

AJ scowled up at him, her lips forming themselves into a childish pout, causing Ron to sputter in confusion and nervousness even more, backing away and holding a hand up to indicate her to remain where she was.

"Look, Potter, you are obviously drunk and I don't have time to be with a Slytherin prat like you..." Ron said carefully, gulping as he backed away from her.

Frankly, he hadn't expected AJ to react that way, even if the girl *did* appear to look as drunk as hell. It was freaking him out... To say the very least... Ron was snapped out of his thoughts as AJ stood up again, haughtily dusting her robes off and giving him her meanest glare.

"Is that so? Well then, why, in Merlin's name, are *you* following *me*?" She asked smugly, nearly falling over once again if Ron hadn't rushed forward and caught her arm firmly.

"As much as I hate you Potter, I just didn't like leaving a drunken girl alone like that in the middle of the corridors at night." Ron muttered, helping her on her feet but AJ weakly pushed him away, giving him a look of half-anger and half-confusion.

"Get... Your hands off me, *Weasley*... I don't *need* your help... I can handle myself." She snapped drunkenly again but let out a gasp of surprise when she lost her balance again stumbled forward into Ron's arms.

*Okay, now she is REALLY drunk...* Ron thought, wincing as he slowly settled them both on the floor; carefully handling the delicate girl as though she was a crystalline figure. He rolled his eyes as he set her on the floor before sitting beside her, both of them leaning against the wall in silence.

“What the hell happened to you, Potter? You look drunk out of your mind. Shouldn’t you should be resting in your dorm by this hour.” Ron said snidely, his handsome face formed into an amused grin.

AJ shut her eyes for a moment, leaning against the wall before she opened them again, giving Ron a sleepy yet incredibly endearing look. “Really now? I didn’t know you cared Weasley...” She murmured, playfully stroking his cheek.

Ron’s jaw dropped open as the girl leaned forward again and buried her face in his chest, closing her eyes in bliss.

“P-Potter! What the hell are you doing, someone might see us and take this the wrong way or—”

Ron’s sentence was interrupted when AJ just let out a laugh and looked back up, meeting his eyes with her own, a smirk on her delicate features. “Why? Would that really be a problem, Weasley?” She drawled, this time leaning forward to brush her lips briefly over his cheek, making the boy squelch a squeak and draw back in surprise.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Potter?! Don’t you remember who I am?! This is me, Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor, one of your enemies, someone you don’t like, remember?!” Ron ranted in panic, scooting further away from the girl.

AJ just gave a slow chuckle, raising an eyebrow at him in response as she raised a hand and stroked his cheek again in an attempt to relax him. “I know who you are, *Ron*... And I happen to know something about you that you don’t know for yourself...” She murmured again, giving him a slow, easy smile as she leaned closer to him.

Ron looked at her as though she was insane; paling slightly as he checked to make sure he had heard her right. “W-What did you just call me?” He stuttered.

AJ just smiled at him, raising both eyebrows now as she looked at the surprised look at the boys face. “Ron. That’s your name, isn’t it?” She asked, smirking.



Ron nodded dumbly in reply, too stunned to say anything at all.

AJ just looked back at him silently, silence dawning upon the two before Ron had finally managed to find his voice again, looking at AJ in question.

“Potter—”

“AJ.” The girl corrected abruptly, winking.

Ron just blinked, not moving. “What?”

AJ laughed, shaking her head at him, slightly groaning under her breath as the world took a spin around her again.

“My name is *AJ*... Potter seems way overrated, don't you think? That's a name people most likely associate with my brother.” She slurred, shutting her eyes again.

Ron nodded dumbly again, feeling more stupid in those few moments that he had ever felt in his life. “I don't think so, *Potter*. This is all getting way too confusing for my sanity to endure, okay? Now, *Potter*, would you kindly explain to me just what the bloody hell you are up to?!” Ron snapped, glaring at her.

AJ pouted at him at not hearing her first name but shrugged and leaned against the wall again, giving Ron a knowing smile.

“Just as I said... I may be drunk but I haven't lost my complete sense of thought...And I happen to know that you... Take a rather *personal* interest in me, *Weasley*.” AJ explained simply, smirking.

Ron looked shocked for a moment before forcing a laugh, shaking his head. “Don't flatter yourself too much, *Potter*. Contrary to what you believe, the world does *not* revolve around you.” Ron said snidely, letting out a derisive snort.

But AJ's eyes twinkled mischievously as she grabbed a fistful of Ron's robes, pulling his face up to meet hers only a few centimeters away.

“Oh? Then could you explain to me why you have been taking such an interest in me, Weasley that you seemed to have taken a liking to staring at my activities during class time? Seeing me take down notes couldn’t be *that* stimulating, now could it? The open jaw doesn’t help either...” She teased, her lips quirking into a half-smile.

Ron’s ears turned red as his eyes flashed at her, scowling at her in annoyance and embarrassment at the same time.

“Alright, Potter... If you want me to say it, *fine*. I find you very attractive but that’s all there is to it. Nothing can take away the fact that you’re the most annoying bitch of Slytherin I know.” Ron snapped, surprising AJ with his choice of words.

Her half-smile bloomed into a full self-satisfied one, eyebrow raised slightly in question as she shakily got up, pulling Ron along with her as she did until both of them were back on their feet in the empty corridor.

“Ooh... Language, Ronnie boy... I didn’t know you were man enough to come out straight to me like that... How very Gryffindor of you... I like it.” She teased again, their faces still dangerously close for comfort.

Ron looked at her in fury and confusion, his eyebrows fusing. “Just what exactly do you think you’re playing at, Potter? I’m not the type to be willing to play the fool for you.” He said darkly, scowling.

AJ just laughed, cupping his cheek in her hand. “What makes you think I’m playing some sort of game?” She asked, her voice dropping into a bare whisper as her lips were now ghosting over his.

Ron gulped, keeping his features firm and unreadable as he tried to prevent himself from kissing the girl in front of him. “Come off it, Potter... I know how you are...” He whispered, his hands clenching themselves painfully into fists.

AJ’s eyelids fluttered close as her dazed, unfocused emerald eyes settled themselves on his lips, her face edging closer and closer by the minute.

"I'm not playing *Ron*...And I happen to know that I am bloody attractive and annoying...And you know what else?" She murmured, her lips slightly brushing over his for a mere second.

Ron just began to breathe in shallow gasps, his eyes now completely focused on the luscious, cherry lips in front of him. "What?" He asked, his voice cracking out of desperation.

The corner of AJ's lips twitched as though she was trying to prevent a smile before she raised a hand again and stroked Ron's cheek again with her thumb gently in an affectionate way.

"You're bloody attractive and annoying too..." She murmured, smiling coyly and not giving the stunned Gryffindor a chance to react before she closed the distance between them and pressed her lips against his and wrapping her arms around his neck.

Ron was too stunned to move or do anything for a moment before his desire suddenly took over his sense of mind and he wrapped his arms around her slender waist, returning the kiss with the same passion and intensity as AJ's fingers entangled themselves in his hair.

*Pull back! Pull back! Pull back!* Ron's mind screamed at him but he didn't care at the moment, deepening the kiss as his head began spinning in exhilaration. He had longed too much to satisfy the growing passion he had been keeping for the girl for weeks now that he just couldn't seem to follow his head anymore.

He hadn't realized that kissing one of his enemies would feel this good... It was almost too confusing and complicated to understand that AJ Potter, one of the most beautiful girls in school, would actually like him that way...

They had hated each other for years now and it seemed almost unnatural for them to be looking at each other in any other way besides that... He didn't even know why he had reacted so violently to that article of Rita Skeeter about AJ and Malfoy being a couple... Since when did he care, anyway? It's not as if he actually *fancied* the girl, right? The thought was absolutely laughable itself...

Clearing away his thoughts, Ron decided to deal with the consequences when the time came... Right now, the only thing that mattered the way AJ's lips felt against his and the feeling of his knees buckling and his form trembling as he repeatedly ran his fingers through her long, silky raven hair, enjoying the feel of its silky texture.

Had Ron opened his eyes, he would have noticed that AJ's were wide open as well, looking at him in confusion and bewilderment as though she was trying to understand something in her own mind.

*No... Something is missing... Something doesn't seem right...* She thought, trying to figure out what it was by kissing the Gryffindor deeper, feeling a warm, fuzzy, affectionate warmth bubble up inside of her slightly...

*No, I'm just too drunk... Maybe I just can't focus on the kiss right now...* She reasoned, bringing a hand to Ron's cheek to stroke it gently.

But as the couple continued to kiss each other in the empty corridor, AJ herself couldn't understand the empty and unsatisfied feeling she felt inside. The kiss was incredible, there was no question about that but she couldn't explain what exactly it was that she was waiting for...

She had expected some kind of spontaneous explosion inside her body that would leave her desperately wanting for more...It wasn't there... Breaking the kiss herself, AJ searched Ron's eyes intently, panting slightly for breath as Ron's eyes glowed with fervor and intensity, looking at her in question.

"What's wrong?" He asked breathlessly, fusing his eyebrows together.

AJ dropped her eyes for a minute, obviously in thought before she looked up and gave him a playful smirk again, initiating the kiss once more and this time, kissing him with so much forced passion that it made Ron stiffen in surprise.

Yet again, she felt another passionate warmth overtake her but it still left her confused... Somehow, she had expected her kiss to be much more searing and intensifying than this... After all, she was kissing Ron Weasley, the guy she had hoped to kiss for three long years now...

And here she was, kissing the guy of her dreams, and he was actually kissing her back but... It wasn't as exciting and as intoxicating as she had repeatedly dreamed it to be... It was almost as if...

*He was just some other guy or something...* AJ thought dreadfully, her eyes widening at the thought.

She wasn't feeling the any love or want for him like in her dreams... She had imagined that when she kissed him, her whole body would just ignite on fire and she would forget about everything else around her except for the feeling of his lips on hers but... *The feeling was weak...*

*What's wrong with me? Did I do something wrong? Or am I just exaggerating a bit?* She asked herself desperately, not wanting to believe in her own realizations.

*Maybe I had expected too much... I mean, a single kiss wouldn't really have the same effect it would in real life as it would in dreams right?* She thought shutting her eyes, trying to force herself to feel more of the heat of the moment.

More out of desperation than anything else, AJ opened her eyes again and looked up at the boy she was kissing, who had opened his eyes as well. But...The eyes that she had the image staring at her weren't Ron's brown ones...

*No...Oh Merlin, no it can't be...* AJ's eyes widened in disbelief as she caught sight of the beautiful, intense silver orbs staring down at her, an almost predatory yet loving look in them that made her heart jump painfully, causing her to gasp out loud and pull out of the embrace as though she was on fire.

*"Draco!"* She yelped out, breathing hard and her eyes wide with surprise as she stumbled drunkenly onto the wall behind her, looking at the boy in front of her in shock.

But the boy that was looking at her wasn't Draco... It was still Ron, who looked at her as if she was nuts, his eyes narrowing in anger, question and humiliation all at the same time.

"*Draco*? What the hell does *Malfoy* have to do with this?" Ron demanded, giving AJ a furious look as the raven-haired Slytherin let out a shaky breath of air, running a shaking hand through her disheveled hair.

Ron's eyes narrowed in realization as it hit him and he backed away in disgust as though AJ had suddenly developed some sort of contagious disease, a mocking growl on his face.

"Oh... I see, *Potter*...According to the papers, *Draco*," Ron said the name as though it was a disgusting swear word, "is your supposed *boyfriend*, isn't he?" He taunted sarcastically, flushing an angry red.

AJ looked at him blankly for a minute before she let out a nervous laugh, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Of course not, Weasley...That's crazy. I just thought I....," She racked her mind hastily for something to say.

"I saw him walking through the corridors for a minute and I didn't want him to see me with Gryffindor scum like you." She lied, flashing a snide but playful smirk.

Ron still looked at her doubtfully for a second before he returned the challenging look, raising an eyebrow at her. "Likewise, *Potter*." He answered flatly.

More to prove her feelings for Ron to herself than anything else, AJ edged closer again, her lips caressing his cheek enticingly once more. "From what I can tell you, what happened here tonight was merely brought up by the spur of the moment... *Never* likely to happen again, I can assure you..." She teased, smirking in a not-so-innocent way.

Ron caught on what she was implying and returned it with a lopsided grin, shaking his head. "Although I must say, *Potter*, if I had to kiss my worst enemy, I'm glad it was you." He said, his eyes glinting with loathing again.

AJ just forced another laugh, wanting nothing more than to go back to her dorm at the moment... She couldn't understand her feelings at the moment anymore and she didn't want to face it right now...

*That's the last time I try any kissing while I am drunk...Damn Draco...If he hadn't kissed me this morning...If he hadn't—*She broke her own train of thought, biting her lip.

She couldn't understand anything... Why Ron had kissed her back, why she hadn't felt anything at all in such a passionate moment but most importantly... Why she had seen not Ron's eyes but Draco's in the very heat of that very personal moment?! It's not as if it was normal to see your brother's best friend while you're kissing the guy you actually fancied... It didn't make any sense... What was wrong with her?

AJ was just about to say something when Ron spoke up again, this time a shy, uncertain tone in his voice as he dropped his eyes down on the floor, a faint blush creeping onto his cheeks.

"But... Uhm... Potter?" He asked, clearing his throat. AJ looked up to see him shuffling his feet nervously, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

"Is it... Uh... Possible that this little... Er... *disgusting accident* was to happen again sometime in... Uh... let's say, near future?" He asked timidly, not looking the Slytherin the eye.

AJ's jaw dropped open and an eyebrow cocked up in surprise. She had certainly *not* expected that to happen at all. "...If you want it to, Weasley." She answered back smoothly, not knowing why a strong surge of guilt suddenly overcame her when Ron broke into a genuine grin, his eyes sparkling.

"Not that I like you or anything, Potter..." Ron rushed out hastily, wringing his hands nervously.

AJ gave him a weak, feeble half-smile in return. "I'm glad the feeling is mutual." She answered halfheartedly, shrugging.

Ron snorted but nodded and opened his mouth to say something but he never got the chance before AJ's eyes fluttered close and she finally collapsed against him, finally falling into deep state of drunk unconsciousness.

“Potter!” Ron hissed, grunting as he caught the girl from falling onto the floor, wrapping his arms around her delicate figure and lifting her from the ground. Ron sighed heavily and gently brushed a lock of raven hair that had fallen into her eyes, supporting her body with both hands as he took one of her arms and threw it over his neck, his eyes focused intently on the girl’s lovely features.

Though reluctantly, Ron slowly stroked her pale yet slightly flushed smooth cheek with his thumb, savoring the way it felt so soft against his fingers. *Merlin... Why do you have to be so damn beautiful, Potter?* Ron thought in frustration, silently cursing AJ’s attractive features.

*I better bring her down to the dungeons...* He thought, cursing his own misfortune under his breath as he began to walk off towards Slytherin territory, shaking his head in disbelief as he reflected on what had just happened before him.

He hadn’t even expected to run into the Slytherin that night since he had just stepped out of the Common Room to take a walk of fresh air, wanting to spend some time alone to himself and think about his growing attraction to one of his enemies.

And yet, just like a bad omen, there she was, the very same person he was thinking about at that very moment, walking down the corridor with such a cute look of confusion on her face as though she didn’t have any idea where she was going.

He didn’t know why but he suddenly had an instinct to walk towards her and attempt a civil conversation with the girl... As much as he wanted to deny it, he had been developing some sort of attraction towards her and he wanted to find out if those it was real.

*She’s just... I don’t know... So damn beautiful...* He had thought over and over again, trying to erase the image of AJ’s teasing eyes that day during detentions or the way her lips seem to demand a sort of drawing attention to them that always made him want to claim them completely.

He knew it was wrong to be attracted to his enemy and hell, he didn’t even understand *why* or *how* he could be but ever since that day that



AJ had flirted with him during detentions, he couldn't get her off his mind.

Maybe he shouldn't take it so seriously... After all... Slytherins had a reputation of not actually being serious about the people they flirt with but somehow, Ron had finally begun to take notice of the many times AJ had paid a lot of extra attention to him in the past years...

And Ron had to admit that over the years, he had also come to see the girl in a whole new different light rather than the annoying, prissy little girl he had met in their first year.

She had the Potter charm... No question about that... Ron could definitely see the same ruthlessness, the same appeal and the same alluring look she had in her eyes that Harry had used to his advantage.

And she was definitely something worth looking at... Even Ron had to admit, he never did seem to wonder why a lot of boys at school seemed to glance her way every time she walked into the room. Hell, even his own best friend, Seamus, had a slight thing for the girl.

But... No matter what happened, he still couldn't change the fact that she was in Slytherin and not only that... The girl was the sister of Harry Potter himself... He could *not* get involved with her that way without meeting a lot of complications.....

*Just my luck ... Out of all the girls in school, I had to fancy AJ Potter...* He thought wryly before his eyes widened at the thought and he shook his head, turning red in realization.

*What am I saying?! I don't like her!! I just...Damn...I never thought my enemy would be my first kiss... Never knew the girl could be such a good kisser...* He thought, blushing even darker at the thought.

Ron shuddered, thinking about what Seamus and Hermione's reactions would be once they found out that of all the females at Hogwarts, he had to have a freakin crush on AJ Potter...

After all... You don't see Seamus or Hermione going after Slytherin girls like he did... Ron snorted in amusement as he imagined

Hermione having a crush on Harry Potter... The idea made him want to laugh out loud all by itself...

But... Ron still couldn't deny the fact that indeed... He was very much interested in AJ and he had a dreadful feeling that pretty soon, he would begin to realize that soon... He could only hope that she felt the same about him... He could see from his other housemates how hard it was to love a Slytherin...

It didn't help that AJ was surrounded by people would stop at nothing to prevent Ron from getting together with her....*Potter, Malfoy, Zabini*...Sighing, he just shook his head, confused by his own thoughts.

Ron stopped just as he reached the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room which he remembered going to when he and Seamus had used the Polyjuice Potion Hermione had made for them to look like Crabbe and Goyle so they could enter the Common Room and ask Potter and Malfoy questions about the Chamber of Secrets.

He couldn't help giving a grin as he remembered how they had almost been caught by the duo themselves when they had started changing right then and there in front of the Slytherins before they had rushed out, covering their faces as they went.

Sighing, Ron looked down at AJ again, wondering how he was going to leave her there when he suddenly felt another surge of longing ripple through him as he stared at her lips.

*Well... It's now or never...*He thought, leaning over again and planting another brief yet gentle kiss on the girl's unmoving lips before he looked back at the entrance, wondering how he was going to get it to open or enter it at all.

Then, as though someone had heard his silent thoughts, the wall suddenly slid open and Draco stepped out, looking slightly drunk as well but seeing Ron there, his eyes narrowed dangerously and he let out an angry sneer, his hands clenching into fists.

"Just what the *fuck* do you think you are doing in Slytherin territory, Weasel?! And how the bloody hell were you able to find this

entrance?!” He burst out, his cheeks slightly flushed and his movements a bit unsteady.

Ron glared back, not saying anything until Draco’s eyes widened dangerously when he caught sight of AJ, who was still unconscious, lying in Ron’s arms with her arms slung around the Gryffindor’s neck.

Draco didn’t even hear Ron’s cold explanation as his silver eyes clouded over in ultimate anger and jealousy, seeing nothing but red all around him as he slowly eyed at where Ron’s hands were touching AJ, his anger growing more and more by the minute.

Being drunk didn’t help either as Draco’s usually cool exterior and levelheaded mind was completely forgotten, his eyes going from wide to dangerous slits, his handsome face twisting itself into a hideous snarl of absolute rage that Ron backed away in panic.

“Whoa... Hey, Malfoy, cool down, I just came here to bring back your little Slytherin princess, anyway!” Ron said, glaring at the furious blonde in front of him.

Draco barely heard what he said, still looking at where Ron’s hands were on AJ’s form, growling like an enraged animal. *Weasley is actually touching AJ... He actually has the fucked up nerve to touch ‘MY’ woman! Who the fuck does he think he is??* Draco thought, taking a step forward and grabbing the wall to keep himself from stumbling.

“What... In the bloody hell.. Are you doing with AJ?” Draco asked slowly, his voice betraying no amount of anger.

Ron slowly backed away, gently putting AJ down on the floor before he turned back to face the other boy with a challenging look in his eyes.

“Look, Malfoy, from what I can see, you’re drunk too so—” But Ron never got to finish his sentence as Draco literally lunged at him, tackling him down to the floor and beginning to repeatedly punch him in anger, a murderous and malicious gleam in his eyes.

“How dare you touch her, you good for nothing bastard! I’m going to *kill* you, Weasley! She’s *mine!*” He yelled out loud furiously, punching Ron right in the jaw just as Ron’s eyes flashed in anger as well and he began to fight back, both boys forgetting about the wands they had as they beat each other right here on the cold floor.

“Sod off, Malfoy! You don’t own her!” Ron raged, socking Draco in the stomach, causing the blonde to fall back slightly, his drunk, unfocused eyes glinting once again before he growled and attacked Ron again, this time, managing to sock him in the eye.

Ron let out a grunt of pain before he used Draco’s unsteady state to shove him away, causing the Slytherin to collapse violently against the wall and grimace in pain.

“Fuck you, Weasley!” Draco growled again before Ron stood up and lunged at him this time, repeatedly punching Draco violently, letting out all the anger and hatred he had for Slytherin as he just punched him senseless, cursing him with every punch.

Draco’s eyes glazed over in pain as he barely registered what was happening, being too drunk to fight back properly. He let out another cry of pain as Ron’s fist connected with his face again, causing a trickle of blood to run down his jaw.

“Not so tough now, are you Malfoy?” Ron taunted, raising a fist again and directing it at Draco’s face but before he could manage to throw the punch, he felt another strong grip grasping his fist and shoving him into the opposite wall.

Growling in annoyance, Ron turned to see the flash of anger in the same emerald-green eyes as AJ had, glaring right at him with hatred and rage, making him back away slightly in intimidation.

“Potter...”

“You asshole! What the hell are *you* doing here?!” Harry growled, shoving him again, this time harder, causing the Gryffindor to hit his head against the wall rather painfully. He blinked in pain, barely noticing Blaise Zabini walk out of the Common Room and carrying AJ’s slender form inside.

Harry watched them for a minute, making sure his twin was safely inside the Common room before he turned to face Ron, his eyes glinting dangerously. "Just what the bloody hell were you doing with my sister, Weasley?! Huh?! Are you interested in her or something because I can assure you, she is *off limits!*" Harry raged.

"Sod off, Potter! This doesn't involve you!" Ron snapped at him, his eyes blazing.

Harry's eyes narrowed treacherously, an evil grin forming on his handsome face. "Of course it does, Weasley! No one messes with my twin *and* beats up my best friend like that!" He snarled, smirking maliciously before he lunged for the other boy again.

Draco didn't bother moving as Harry began to do the same thing Ron had done to him, punching him repeatedly before Ron used up his last bit of strength and shoved the Slytherin away, growling as he wiped the blood from his broken nose.

He was about to attack Harry again when he suddenly saw Draco getting up and shakily walking over beside Harry, both of them with a murderous intention in their glare.

Ron glanced back and forth between the two Slytherin boys, taking a cautious step back in panic, earning him a smirk from the popular Slytherin duo.

Just as he thought Potter was going to throw a punch at him first, they heard hurried footsteps racing towards them, making the three boys turn abruptly as another person joined them.

"Hermione! What you are doing here?!" Ron demanded, trying to shield the girl away from the Slytherins' view but it was too late; Draco had already seen Hermione and was giving the girl a look of pure disdain.

"What is this?! The mudblood has come to join the fight? I will *not* soil my hands in touching *you*, Granger." Draco said snidely, sneering.

Harry glared at his best friend for a minute, not knowing why he had done so, before he grabbed a fistful of Draco's robes and shoved him lightly, indicating him to shut up.

"Sod off, Draco." Was the cold, snappy reply from Harry, the Slytherin not even meeting his best friend's shocked, questioning glare as he turned his eyes away in attempt to hide his gaze.

Hermione just looked back and forth between them, her gaze lingering for a moment on Harry with a sad, almost longing look in them, which Harry briefly returned, keeping his expression blank and neutral but Hermione knew the truth...

She could see it... She saw everything she needed to know in Harry's usually cold emerald orbs which were staring at her in a pleading look... Almost as if they were... *begging me to understand...* She thought, sighing.

Draco and Ron both looked back and forth between the two, Ron looking as though he was waiting for one of them to explode and Draco as though he was threatening his best friend to try to do something he would regret doing.

She hadn't known why but she had developed an almost dreadful feeling of anxiety that night and without knowing the exact reason why, she had crept out of bed, something she did *not* do at all, and headed out to where she knew the Slytherin dorms would be, feeling her anxiety grow with each step.

As soon as she reached her destination, she knew her instincts had been right. She saw full scale what was happening as Ron and Draco squared off first, AJ's unconscious form lying down on the floor against the wall. Then, she had watched with a rapidly pounding heart how Harry had rushed out and responded to his best friend's need.

She had rushed into the scene immediately, not wanting Ron or Harry to get hurt in anyway but she had not expected Harry to give her the cold shoulder when she got there... It was almost as if... Everything was as it was before... Like they hadn't had a special friendship between them at all...

Now... As Hermione glanced back at Harry's unmoving state, silently pleading with him to stop the fight, she saw the stubbornness in them in not wanting to show his affections or their friendship publicly, the slight pleading look still visible.

*Fine...* Hermione thought sadly, sighing in reluctant agreement as she put a comforting hand on Ron's shoulder, and wiping the blood on his face with her white handkerchief.

Harry felt his muscles tense as he watched the scene unfold in front of him, barely being able to prevent himself from attacking Ron again but Draco stuck out a hand to hold him back, shaking his head. Out of his anger and growing jealousy, Harry allowed a growl to escape him as he took a step towards the Gryffindors, his hands clenching tightly.

"Aw, look Draco! The perfect geek couple! Granger and Weasel! The mudblood and the loser, hey Weasley, don't forget to wash your face where Granger touched you! Might stain your so-called *pureblood*!" Harry raged, his eyes narrowing dangerously, seeing nothing but red around him as he glared at where Hermione's beautiful hands touched Ron's face.

"Don't you dare insult Hermione like that, Potter!" Ron fumed, trying to attack him again but Hermione held him back.

She tore her gaze away from Ron to glare momentarily at Harry, her beautiful brown eyes glistening with hurt tears as Harry felt his heart squeeze painfully at the sight, barely able to hear Draco's laughter as he longed to eat his words right back in his mouth.

Before she could stop herself, she stepped forward, raised a hand and slapped Harry on his cheek—*Hard*. The sickening sound echoed through the silent, empty corridors but Harry barely felt the pain, his eyes glazing over in now unmistakable guilt and remorse, looking away from the girl in front of him, not out of pain but out of shame.

*I shouldn't have said that...* He realized, not having the courage to meet Hermione's accusing, hurt gaze as he glared down at the floor. He did not even bother to react to the painful stinging on his cheek where a red bruise was now forming.

He couldn't bear it... He couldn't meet the betrayed, pained look in Hermione's eyes... Every time he did it... It made him want to feel something he didn't want to feel and it made him want to do something he didn't want to do... He couldn't give in, no matter how much it hurt him... He would not be weak...

"Let's just go, Ron, we have better things to do than tolerate these jerks... Come on, I don't even know why you came here." Hermione said coldly, her voice slightly quivering in pent-up emotion, sending a sharp pang through Harry that surprised even him.

"Yeah, it's about time! Don't you both ever come here to Slytherin territory again! We don't want losers on our turf!" Draco snapped at them, giving Harry a disbelieving look which his best friend did not meet either, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

Hermione was about to walk off with Ron when she felt a strong, yet gentle hand grip her arm tightly, making her stop in her tracks and face the uncertain, almost scared boy behind her, his eyes still not meeting hers.

"Granger... I... I'm *sorry*..." He whispered, causing both Draco and Ron's jaws to drop to the floor.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as she stared at the boy in front of her, finally seeing the guilt, desperation and pleading look in his eyes once again but the words that had just come out of his mouth were enough to shock her at the moment.

*Harry Potter never said sorry...*

Or at least... He never gave in to feeling anything similar to guilt or remorse for all the rude comments he said to other people... She could understand how Draco and Ron could look so shocked...

Harry Potter had actually, for the first time in his life, set his pride aside and apologized publicly to her... He actually cared... He actually had feelings... *He actually has a heart*...Hermione thought, feeling a strange feeling bubble up inside her.



Sighing, she quirked her lips into a small, secret smile for the boy, not saying anything but letting him know she understood and she forgave him, which Harry could not only return with a slight nod.

"Nice try Potter but that act won't get me again... I know you're just playing with me." Hermione snapped out loud, earning her once again a confused look from Harry before it dawned upon him and his eyes widened in realization.

*She's covering for me...* Harry thought, watching as Hermione helped Ron walk away, not being able to see the soft smile on the girl's face as she did.

He could hear Ron's shocked rants as they walked down the corridor before he let out a breath of exhaustion and turned to face Draco, who was looking at him with an angry glare, obviously still drunk.

"Would you mind telling me what the *fuck* was that all about, Potter?!" Draco roared, shoving Harry roughly in challenge which Harry didn't bother to return, being too tired and worn out.

"Well?! Answer me, godammit! Why the bloody *fuck* were you suddenly defending the mudblood?! Huh?! What the hell do you think you're playing at?!" Draco demanded furiously, shoving him again, this time against the wall.

Harry's eyes flashed now but he held his anger back, his energy too spent up to lunge at Draco.

"*Sod off*, Malfoy, I am not in the mood for this." Harry replied coldly and slowly, trying to walk past Draco to enter the Common Room but Draco held him back, staring at him straight in the eye.

"Tell me the truth, Harry. Are you or are you *not* falling for Granger?" He asked slowly, making sure Harry heard every word. Harry's eyes widened in alarm as he forced a malicious laugh, shaking his head hastily but Draco glared at him, demanding the truth.

"Because if you are, Harry... Then maybe we should call this bet off right here and now..." He said, a dark look in his eyes.

Harry shook his head firmly, sighing as he leaned back against the wall, shutting his eyes in confusion. "It's nothing, Draco, as I told you, it's just an infatuation... Granger is the only girl I know whom I have spent this long seducing and she is really starting to get to me... It's all lust, that's all... I can handle it." Harry affirmed, biting his lip in an attempt to make himself believe his own words, his eyes still shut tight.

Draco didn't flinch, just glaring at him. "Well, it appears to me that after what I have just witnessed tonight, you seem to be growing rather *fond* of the Gryffindor, Harry... As I said before, know your limits..." He finished slowly, letting the words sink in.

"I know that, Draco! Hell, this is *me*, you're talking about here! I *can't* fall in love! It's just not possible, okay?! Just trust me, I know what I'm doing, you don't have to keep telling me that!" Harry snapped, punching the wall violently.

Draco just nodded, still fixing Harry with a stern glare.

"Don't you get attached to the girl, Harry... She's no different than the others anyway... Just like those them, you will do what you do best with her and after that, drop her flat, just like we agreed on. She shouldn't mean anything else to you but a stupid dare. Don't you dare become weak..." Draco drawled silently.

Harry nodded dumbly, his tongue too tied up to even speak.

"The worst thing that could ever happen to you is that you fall in love with the girl that you were never supposed to in the first place... Never fall for the girls you play around with Potter... Because one day, that girl just might play around with you." Draco concluded, shaking his head as he put a firm hand on Harry's shoulder for a minute before he headed back inside the common room, wiping the blood from his face.

Harry just stayed out there for a longer period of time, his eyes still shut as he pondered on Draco's words.

"*Slytherins can't afford to love Gryffindors...*" The words still haunted him, echoing over and over in his head.

But as he replayed all of Draco's words in his head, he couldn't help but notice that there sentence that was entirely wrong...

Hermione was definitely not like the other girls before.... She was... *Different* somehow... She made him feel something he had never felt before and it had felt great... It was something special... Something so unique yet so addicting that it was enough to satisfy Harry altogether, even if they didn't sleep together...

*The way her eyes had looked so beautiful earlier...* Harry sighed again, trying to banish away the thought. Their date was tomorrow night and he couldn't afford to let his growing feelings for Hermione develop into something more... He had to keep his control...

He just couldn't hide the fact that, like it or not, Hermione certainly had a huge effect on him that he couldn't quite comprehend...

The way her eyes sparkled when she was happy, the way she scrunched up her nose in a cute way when she was annoyed, the way her gentle laughter seemed to echo through his mind...

Harry shook his head furiously, disgusted at himself for thinking such ridiculous thoughts.

Hermione was just... *Hermione*...Everything about her was just so admirable... So alluring... He couldn't quite understand it... Everything about Hermione seemed...*Perfect*...Harry thought, running a hand through his hair.

And quite frankly, Harry had never used that word to describe any girl at all... He would always seem to find something horrible about each girl he slept with before to mock them with but somehow... With Hermione... He couldn't find anything wrong with her if he tried...

She was beautiful... Brave... Ambitious... Strong-Willed... Intelligent...*Pure*... Everything he had ever dreamed of... *Plain perfect*...Harry thought silently, a soft smile breaking out on his lips.

He didn't exactly know what was so different about her but he knew it was there... He knew it was otherwise, he wouldn't have felt the difference... She made him feel so alive... It was like he wanted to

spend every moment with her just to be in her presence...Just to see her smile...

No other girl made him feel like this... No other girl had the same effect on him as Hermione did... There was a certain glow to her that Harry saw every time that stole away all his attention...

*Dammit... What the hell am I doing?! I think I'm going to be sick!* Harry thought, shaking his head furiously again, determined to get Hermione Granger away from his mind.

*I'm acting so pathetic...* He thought in disgust but as he suddenly became aware of the rapid beating of his heart against his chest, he finally realized that indeed, the worst has happened, and the answer was clearly staring him in the face.

*Holy shit...* Harry thought, his eyes widening. A sinking feeling of dread came upon the shocked raven-haired Slytherin.

*What the fuck have I gotten myself into?*

*What a hang-over...* AJ thought as she woke up in her bed later that night, looking around the dormitory in surprise as she noticed Pansy, Lila and Millicent groaning in their sleep as well with the same problem.

*I wonder who carried my back to my dorm... Last thing I remember was being with Ron and...* AJ blushed, remembering exactly what had happened with the Gryffindor.

She couldn't quite remember all of it... But the event she couldn't really forget was when she had actually felt Ron's lips against her own... Such a warm, comforting and relaxing feeling... It wasn't intensely passionate like she hoped it would but...

The feeling was something that was stable... It wasn't empowered much by desire or intense longing but more out of *attraction*... It made her feel a warm glow of affection for the cute redhead.

Groaning, AJ got up slowly from her bed, clutching her forehead in pain as she sat up and looked around the room.

In her head, an image of those beautiful silver eyes flashed into her mind once again, making her gasp out in surprise and jump up, managing to bump her head against the top of her four poster bed.

“Ow!” She hissed, falling back onto the bed, wincing in pain. *Damn...* She cursed to herself, laying her head back down the pillow as she closed her eyes and tried to relive the scene.

There she was... Kissing the absolute boy of her dreams... And she just had to think about her brother’s best friend... *What the fuck is wrong with me?!* She thought angrily, rolling her eyes.

She didn’t know what had happened before or after that... Hell, she didn’t even remember much of what Ron had told her before that or how they had managed to meet up in the corridor...

She didn’t remember shit except for the fact that *she* had kissed Ron... Not the other way around... *She* had initiated the kiss... She had made a complete fool of herself...

*Give me a break... I was half drunk...* She thought irritably, sighing in exasperation. Kissing a boy like that was not exactly her best approach at catching the handsome Gryffindor’s attention but at least she had finally let him know how she felt...

She just wasn’t so sure if he had felt the same way... *Though... He did kiss me back... Had I made some advances when I was with him?* She wondered, fusing her eyebrows together.

She seriously hoped she hadn’t... She could just imagine Harry’s reaction when she told him that she had flirted and kissed one of his enemies... Hell, she didn’t even want to know his reaction when he found out she had a crush on the Gryffindor... She knew he would never approve...

*And that kiss... Was a kiss really supposed to be like that?* AJ thought, trying to hide the sinking feeling of disappointment in her stomach.

It wasn't like the kiss wasn't exciting because it was...Her lips had tingled with anticipation the whole time and just the very thought of kissing Ron again made her blush slightly...

She had never really thought Ron would be such a good kisser but... She just couldn't help thinking that *something* was missing... She was waiting for something... There was an element missing in the whole moment...

Something that was missing that didn't quite give the kiss the surreal *impact* she had anticipated for... The kiss that she had dreamed of having and taking her very breath away for the past three years...

The minute she had kissed him, a surge of excitement had surged through her and it had lasted a long time but the thing that had surprised her the most was when that surge of passion weakened as the kiss progressed...

AJ sighed, her head spinning from her confusion.

The kiss had definitely given her a good, warm feeling but she had been waiting for some sort of fiery passion to ignite within her that would send her heart flying... It wasn't the first kiss she had expected...

AJ's eyes suddenly widened as she remembered the fact that Ron *hadn't* been her first kiss... No... It had been... *Draco...Dammit, Draco...He...He' stole my first kiss!* She thought indignantly, her breath caught in her throat.

*What does he have to do with my kiss with Ron?* She thought frustration, biting her lip as she recalled the feeling that had overcome her when she saw such a vivid image of his eyes... She didn't know how or why that had suddenly happened but... She knew it was wrong...

Draco was just one of her close friends... It's not as if she had ever felt something for him before... He was Harry's best friend for Merlin's sake... He had almost been like a brother to her all these years... She had never seemed to think of him in another way other than that... Hell the boy was such a bloody annoying git to her most of the

time so how could she ever think of him in that kind of serious point of view?

*But...* AJ closed her eyes, remembering how Draco's eyes had blazed with something she couldn't describe when she had woken him up and he had pressed his lips against hers... As much as she didn't want to admit it, he had made her feel something she never thought she would ever feel before...

*And...* If she wanted to find out what exactly that feeling was... *I have to know...* She thought, shaking her head before she got up abruptly from her bed, making sure the other girls were asleep before she pulled her nightgown tighter around her form and sneaked out of the dormitory.

Shivering slightly, she walked silently to the boys' dorms, holding onto the walls to keep herself from keeling over. Then, very carefully, she opened the door, wincing as its hinges made a soft creak in the silence of the room.

Holding her breath, she stepped inside the room, biting her lip as she looked around to make sure no one had noticed her walk in. Squinting, AJ walked over to her brother's bed and pulled back the curtains, peering down at him.

Smiling at how his forehead was creased as he slept, she leaned over and dropped a feather-light kiss on his cheek before she closed the curtains again and shakily headed over to the four-poster bed across.

AJ took a deep breath before she slowly pulled back the curtains, looking at the handsome blonde Slytherin buried under the sheets, his breathing coming in at a slow, steady pace.

Before she lost her nerve, AJ climbed onto the bed and lay there right next to him, leaning over him so that their faces were only inches apart as she studied his features carefully.

Biting her lip, AJ stroked his cheek gently, pushing back a lock of silver blonde hair that had fallen into his eyes. Draco murmured

something in his sleep, stirring slightly before his breathing became steady again, making AJ relax in relief.

Studying his features closely again, AJ traced a line with her finger from his smooth cheek to his strong jaw until she came to his lips, which she traced very gently, her eyes clouding over.

Draco seemed to lean into the tender caress before AJ took a nervous breath, her eyes still focused on his lips.

“Damn you for this, Draco...Damn you for confusing me like this, for making me *feel* this way but... I... I gotta know... I have to figure out exactly what is this I’m feeling for you... Please... Understand me...” She whispered very lightly, moving her hand to rest on his cheek again before she leaned forward and caught his lips in a very gentle kiss, feeling all the blood rushing up to her head.

Still slightly nervous, AJ hesitantly began to kiss him deeper, surprised and afraid of how a searing, fiery emotion had erupted in her, her lips feeling as though they were burning with such passion as her eyes fluttered shut almost involuntarily.

Reaching a hand up, she gently stroked his cheek again, her lips caressing his own motionless yet sweet ones very softly, enjoying the wonderful feeling of his lips pressed against hers in such a tender kiss.

Before she knew what was happening, AJ felt strong arms begin to snake their way around her waist, pressing her closer to the Slytherin as his motionless lips began to move against her own, kissing her back with the same amount of passion and desire she was feeling.

As she gasped in surprise, Draco used that advantage to press their bodies closer against each other, deepening the kiss and running a hand through her silky, raven hair, his hands coming to rest on her smooth cheek.

AJ felt her head begin to spin around in wild circles as her breathing hitched in her throat, feeling all the blood rush through her veins and her heart beginning to pound so hard in her chest that it was almost painful.



As the kiss grew on and on, draining AJ with the little energy and sanity she had left, she reluctantly pulled away to breathe but soon after her lips had left Draco's, he had leaned forward again, this time, more aggressively as he claimed her lips once more, his hand moving to the back of her neck to pull her face closer.

AJ felt the same intense, scorching feeling explode right inside her, taking full control of her entire body as she leaned forward again, entangling her fingers in his hair and kissing him with so much force that both of them felt each other's form trembling in their embrace.

*This is wrong... This is so wrong...* A voice inside AJ's head persisted, bringing enough sense back into her spinning mind for her to pull back sharply away from Draco as though he had been on fire, her eyes wide with alarm and uncertainty.

*What does this all mean?* She thought, sitting back up on the bed and trying to move away from him.

*It doesn't mean anything! This doesn't mean anything! You like Ron and he likes you back, don't you spoil that opportunity on your confusion over an annoying jerk like Draco! You've waited too long for this chance... Don't be a fool!* An annoying voice screamed inside her head, making her cringe.

*I like Ron don't I? And I have a chance with him now... He might actually like me back... I cannot ruin that... I 'will' not ruin that... That's how it's going to be...* AJ thought in decision as she gazed at the handsome boy in front of her forlornly in silence.

*What was... What was that??* Draco thought, waking up after he had experienced the most passionate, the fiercest kiss he had ever had in his life.

He couldn't remember ever experiencing a kiss like that before... It was *incredible*... He had never known that so much desire and emotions could be felt in a single kiss alone... He had never thought a single *kiss* alone could make him feel that way...

Though it was for a brief, subtle moment, the kiss held much more emotion than all of the past kiss he had experiences put together...

Before he could attempt to open his eyes, he heard a soft, familiar voice speaking right in front of him.

"I don't understand you Draco... Why are you doing this to me... I was *not* supposed to feel this way about *you*...It *wasn't supposed* to be *you*...It *never* was...This is so wrong..." The voice whispered before he felt a hand caress his cheek.

Draco's eyes fluttered open very slowly, squinting in the darkness at the figure in front of him, trying to make out her face but he couldn't see anything in the vast darkness except for the outline of the figure.

As he heard the figure gasp out in surprise, he managed to catch a glimpse of wide, panicky emerald green eyes, sparkling beautifully, standing out in the darkness of the room. A strong feeling of surprise, hope and disbelief flooded through his heart as he dared to speak the name of the girl he had been hoping it was all along...

"AJ?"

The figure's eyes seemed to widen more in panic and a sharp intake of breath was heard before the figure literally jumped off the bed, a loud, heavy thump vibrating off the floor.

Draco didn't have any time to react before he heard frantic, heavy footsteps dashing out of the room and moments later, the door closing with a dull thud, engulfing him in absolute silence.

*What just happened?* He asked himself, looking around the room in confusion as he tried to understand the event that had just taken place, his head still hurting from the hangover he still had from all the butterbeer he drank.

Looking around the room, he saw that Harry's bed curtains were still tied together, meaning he was still asleep and he hadn't noticed anything strange and looking over at Blaise's bed, he saw that the other boy was still asleep too.

Crabbe and Goyle weren't even a consideration as the two slept on, snoring loudly in the silence, making Draco roll his eyes in annoyance. Feeling a strange tingle on his lips, Draco sat up, cringing in pain, but

slowly brought his hand up to his lips, feeling it as he thought about what had happened.

Had it been some sort of realistic dream? Or had AJ actually kissed him in the middle of the night... Or morning to be exact...He couldn't quite understand at the moment... He was too wasted to think straight...

All he could think about was how his lips had felt when he had kissed her...How *he* had felt when he had kissed her... How his heart had been beating so painfully against his chest and how perfect their forms had seemed to fit against each other... Like they actually belonged together...

*It was so real... Was it really a dream??* Draco thought in confusion, groaning as his head began to throb again and he collapsed back on the bed, burying his face in the pillow.

*Maybe I had just imagined it or something... Maybe it had only been Lila or Dana or some other girl who had come here and I just imagined it was AJ...*He reasoned, shaking his head.

Draco frowned and turned in his bed, looking up at the top of his four-poster in question. *Frankly...At this state... I really can't tell reality from a dream...*He thought, shaking his head.

*But if it had been a dream... Then damn... It was... That was wonderful...* He thought, sighing heavily as he put a hand to his lips again, as though he was making sure that it had really been a dream...

*A part of me can still hope that it was indeed a reality...*He concluded, finally allowing himself to become sleepy once more, his hand still resting on his lips as one last thought remained in his mind.

*Please, dear Merlin, let me dream it again...*He thought before he finally closed his eyes and let the silent night lull him into a deep state of dreamless sleep.

**A/N:** Poor Draco, he's so wasted that he doesn't even realize that it wasn't a dream at all. **PLEASE REVIEW!! MWAH!!** Luvyah all!!

## Chapter 16- Beautiful

“Break some hearts, Potter.”

Harry looked up at his own smirking reflection in the mirror the following night just in time to see his mirror image winking at him and shooting him an encouraging smirk in acknowledgement.

Harry returned the smirk, briefly admiring the way he had gelled his raven hair back neatly from his face, exposing his beautiful emerald-green eyes which were currently without the silver-framed glasses and instead contacts, allowing the beautiful orbs sparkle more vibrantly than they had ever before.

He surprised himself when he saw eagerness and anticipation in his eyes, making them seem brighter and much more alive than he had ever seen them before that they would have made even the most beautiful emeralds hang their heads down in shame.

Looking around the dormitory, Harry made sure none of his housemates were in the room before he began scrutinizing his attire, not knowing why he was feeling his pulse race up in increasing anxiety.

Since the date was going to be in Hogsmeade that night, Harry had pulled Hermione aside one the other day and had told her not to wear their usual school robes since they might draw attention from other villagers.

Just as Draco and the other guys headed out to the Great Hall for dinner, Harry had told Draco to cover for him, telling him all about the planned rendezvous and assuring the skeptical blonde that it was all part of their gamelan. Draco had been doubtful about it first but agreed and had promised to make sure no one would find out about the so-called special meeting.

Now, as Harry surveyed himself in the full-length magical mirror of the dorm, he couldn't felt but feel his Slytherin confidence and self-satisfaction returning as he admired his own attire.

He had worn his signature color of course—an emerald green, silk robe which brought out his eyes nicely and contrasted well with his pale skin. Though underneath, he had decided to wear muggle clothing, black pants and a tight green sweater the same shade as his eyes over a white shirt.

A silver lightning bolt-shaped pendant hung loosely from his neck from a thick silver chain and one small silver earring hung from his left ear, the same shape as his pendant.

Harry gave his reflection one last wink before he turned away and briefly sprayed a whiff of his cologne on him, his invisibility cloak and marauder's map tucked between his arms as he headed out of the dorm and hastily made his way over to Gryffindor towers, his heart annoying him as it thumped loudly in his chest.

Checking the marauder's map to make sure no one was in the corridor, Harry paced back and forth in front of the Gryffindor Common Room entrance where the other girls he had gone out with had showed him before, tapping his feet impatiently on the floor as he repeatedly checked his watch over and over again.

*What if Hermione stands me up?* Harry thought in panic, his eyes widening at the humiliating thought. He didn't know how the hell he was going to cope with that kind of rejection and humiliation if she did... No girl had ever stood him up before...

Harry got more and more agitated by the minute and just as he thought she was indeed standing him up, he heard a soft footstep behind him, causing him to whirl around sharply, his eyes wide and alert.

"Hey Harry... I'm sorry... Did I keep you waiting?" Hermione asked softly, a soft smile on her lips as she walked slowly towards him with a faint blush on her cheeks.

Harry didn't answer her, staring at her in absolute awe and shock, his jaw hanging open and practically drooling. Slowly, he let his eyes travel up from her feet all the way up to her beautifully, glowing face, surprisingly feeling his knees buckle weakly underneath him.

Hermione was wearing beautiful pale pink robes which fit snugly around her delicate body, showing off her soft, graceful curves. A beautiful gold lavalier necklace hung loosely from her slender neck.

Her brown eyes were sparkling with warmth, laughter and affection all at the same time and there was a stunning smile on her face that made Harry want to shrivel up against the floor and disappear in nervousness.

But that wasn't what had made the prince of Slytherin gape, no... Hermione had actually *straightened* her long brown hair, letting it fall down loosely just below her shoulders and frame her delicate face as the light cast dazzling streaks of gold on the now silky strands.

The change in her two front teeth were now more noticeable than ever and she was barely recognizable as the once young, bushy-haired girl Harry had once met in the zoo three years ago... She had matured into a gorgeous, young swan...

"H-H-Hermione..." He managed to croak out weakly, his voice cracking as he took a shaky step towards her, not blinking.

Hermione looked at him in concern, her eyebrows fusing together as she stepped forward and placed a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder to calm him. "Harry, are you okay?" She asked worriedly, her brown eyes looking at him in question.

As soon as her hand had touched his shoulder, Harry felt a strong surge of electricity shock right through his skin and he flinched and pulled away rather sharply, breathing for air.

*Don't you dare... Potter... Don't you dare...* A voice inside Harry warned, making him turn his gaze away to avoid showing too much of himself and not liking the feeling of not having control over his emotions.

"I-I'm sorry... I'm fine, it's just that... You look very..." Harry clenched his hands tightly as he let the word out reluctantly. "*Beautiful...*" He whispered, looking right back up at her and gently stroking her soft cheek with his thumb.

Hermione felt a warm blush creeping up to her delicate cheeks as she gave him a smile in return, a slight playful tone in her voice. "You don't look so bad yourself, Potter..." She teased, pretending to eye the boy up and down in interest.

Harry blinked for a moment, not knowing what she had meant before he let out a genuine laugh, rolling his eyes. "So I've been told." He said wryly, giving her a tender smile before he took a deep bow, planting a gentle kiss on Hermione's hand as he did.

"Shall we mademoiselle?" He asked in a deep voice, raising his eyebrows up and down, Hermione laugh in amusement at his antics. Frankly, she had never seen this silly, playful side of Harry before and it was quite charming... She had never known that he could actually make her laugh like this...

Harry winked again as he offered his arm to her, raising his eyebrows expectantly until Hermione willingly linked her own arm through his, her eyes twinkling in excitement. "Uhm... How are we getting there, Harry?" She asked uncertainly as she watched Harry begin to drape a long, silvery cloak over the both of them.

Harry turned and grinned at her under the cloak, raising his eyebrow at her in response. "Hermione, do you know what this is?" He asked, still grinning.

Hermione felt another hot blush creep onto her face at the sight of his smile but she shook her head, looking confused. "It looks like an ordinary cloak to me and I have no idea how this will help us sneak out... Unless..." Her eyes widened in realization, meeting Harry's mischief-filled ones.

"*An invisibility cloak!*How did you get this?!" Hermione hissed in surprise as Harry carefully began leading her down a series of corridors, looking at a piece of parchment cautiously as he did.

Harry quirked his lips into a lopsided grin, shrugging. "It was passed on to me... It was my father's." He answered quietly, looking away.

Hermione instantly nodded in understanding, squeezing his hand in a reassuring way before Harry shrugged it off again, stopping in front of a witch statue and taking out his wand as he did.

“Harry, what are you doing?” Hermione asked, looking at him in confusion as Harry yanked the cloak off them, stepping in front of the statue. Harry didn’t answer her as he tapped the statue with his wand.

“*Dissendium!*” He muttered under his breath, causing Hermione’s eyes to widen as the statue instantly revealed a secret passageway. Turning to Hermione, Harry let out a reckless grin and held out his hand, raising an eyebrow at the Gryffindor girl in challenge.

“This passageway leads directly to Hogsmeade... Although... There is still a small possibility that we might get caught... Willing to take the risk of being caught breaking the rules, *Granger?*” He teased, a playful smirk on his lips.

Hermione mock scowled at him, letting out a tutting sound before she took the hand he offered her and giving him a smug look.

“Contrary to what you all believe, *Potter*, I’m not always the obedient Gryffindor you think I am... I happened to break the rules all the time.” She answered haughtily, now flipping her silky straight hair over her shoulder.

Harry couldn’t help smiling as he raised both his eyebrows at her, trying to look doubtful.

“Is that so, Hermione? Well then maybe you can tell me about those broken rules a little later on, I would love to hear all about your little escapades.” He said, briefly tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

Hermione leaned into the tender gesture for a minute before she smiled again and tugged on his arm, yanking him into the passageway excitedly, making Harry laugh lightly in surprise.

“Whoa, slow down Hermione... Don’t rush, we have a long time to be together...” Harry whispered just as they exited the passageway and started making their way towards the village.



Harry bent down and placed a gentle kiss on Hermione's cheek, his thumb caressing the spot his lips had touched her afterwards, making Hermione's breath hitch in her throat.

Trembling slightly in nervousness, Hermione took a step back from the Slytherin and looked around them, suddenly aware of the darkness of the night. Smiling to herself, she briefly allowed a shiver to run down her spine.

Harry noticed this and wrapped his arms around her, his hands rubbing themselves up and down Hermione's own arms in an effort to warm her. "Are you cold?" He asked in concern, lifting up her cold hand again and giving it another affectionate kiss.

Hermione shook her head, letting out a laugh. "No... I'm just getting freaked out here in the dark... Why don't we go to the village now, I'm beginning to feel a little hungry." She suggested, tugging on the boy's hand.

Harry nodded, smiling as he took her hand and intertwined their fingers together, leading her over to a classy-looking shop in the village as Hermione's thoughts began to cloud her mind once again.

She had no idea why Harry was actually acting like this... To be honest, she had absolutely no idea that he could be this much of a gentleman... On contrary, she had actually been preparing herself to handle his hasty advances all throughout the day, thinking about the other times she had agreed to *meet* him and had ended up fighting off the boy's seductive gestures...

Now... He was just plain charming... Almost as if he wasn't the same boy... And now, Hermione had to notice that Harry was moving in an incredibly slow and uncertain pace as though he was afraid and reluctant about taking things too fast...

He was actually taking his time... Afraid and uncertain with what to do next and openly, that scared Hermione... Harry had always seemed in control and relaxed of the situation, knowing exactly what to do but now, she was feeling the same tension from the boy that was in her own... What did it mean?

Hermione was snapped out of her thoughts as she and Harry sat down on one of the tables in the elegant-looking restaurant, feeling a bit self-conscious as the other people in the shop began to eye the young teenagers suspiciously.

As though he had noticed her discomfort, Harry carefully placed his hand over hers on the table, giving it a firm squeeze in reassurance. "Relax, they're just staring because you're the most beautiful thing they have ever laid eyes on." He said, a sheepish grin on his handsome face.

Instead of blushing, Hermione just laughed out loud, shaking her head at him as Harry looked embarrassed, flushing a deep red.

"Harry, that was certainly not one of your best lines but thanks anyway... I appreciate it..." Hermione said, still chuckling but giving the boy a warm smile as a man came over to take their order.

"Ah, Mr. Potter! How good to see you again! May I take your order?" The man greeted, giving Harry a welcoming smile as he eyed the couple with an amused look.

Harry just nodded in acknowledgement, giving the waiter a friendly smirk. "Hey Steve..." He greeted, rolling his eyes as the man looked at Hermione curiously.

"You sneak out again, Mr. Potter? Ah yes, I do believe this young lady here is the most beautiful girl you have brought here so far." He said, winking at Harry which Harry returned with a dark glare.

"I bet you say that to every girl here, Steve." Hermione quipped laughing at the compliment and blushing prettily as Harry just raised his middle finger up at the waiter, who just grinned in response, giving Hermione an amused look.

"Always the gentleman, isn't he?" He mocked, earning him another glare from Harry but the waiter just laughed again, shaking his head as he began to take their orders. As soon as he had gone, Hermione turned to look at Harry, who was still muttering dark curses under his breath in annoyance.

“Harry, what exactly did he mean with what he said earlier? Have you brought other girls here besides me? How come he seems to know you so well already?” Hermione asked, her eyes looking suspicious.

Harry gave her another sheepish look, shrugging. “He was just teasing me... I’ve only been here once before with Parkinson... We were on a double date with Draco and Perrine back when we were both temporarily insane...” He said, looking disgusted.

Hermione laughed, raising the goblet of water to her lips to take a short sip. “Why here? Harry, this place looks extremely expensive and just as I was looking at the menu earlier I thought I was going to faint...” She said worriedly.

Harry laughed with her, squeezing her hand again as he glanced around, secretly giving a glare to every witch or wizard that sent a look at them. “Don’t worry about it, Hermione. Money is not really a problem for me...” He told her, taking a sip from his goblet as well.

Hermione looked at him curiously, an eyebrow raised in question. “Oh? Why is that?” She asked.

“Well... Apparently, my father, James Potter, was the only heir to the Potter fortune during his time so he had inherited all of it... And when he died, all those riches were passed on to both me and AJ...” He explained, staring off for a moment.

Hermione nodded silently for a minute, looking at him with a concerned look before her hands caressed his on the table and she moved her chair closer until their knees were touching, drawing the stunned boy’s attention back to her.

“Do you... remember much about your parents, Harry?” She asked softly, her eyes gentle and understanding. Harry’s eyes hardened momentarily before he sighed, taking her hand and caressing it softly in his own, his eyes briefly admiring how soft her fingers felt against his.

“Not really... I never really knew much about them at all... All I could remember was hearing my mother’s voice, screaming for my father to

come back, before a flash of green light and then nothing... Total darkness..." Harry said quietly, his voice calm and steady.

Hermione listened closely, nodding in understanding and patience she gently urged him with her eyes to go on.

"Then... I could hear *him*..... Hear him laughing at her... Laughing at her, laughing at my dad and laughing at us... I never heard the words but I knew he had muttered the killing curse because then... I remembered pain... The most excruciating pain you could ever imagine.. It's been haunting my dreams for years." Harry murmured, surprised at himself that he was actually sharing this so openly with Hermione.

Never, in his entire life, had he ever told anyone else about his parents except for AJ and Draco... Hell, he never even bothered talking about himself with the other girls he had dated...

He wouldn't be bothering with little things such as getting to know you conversations... He would be focused on the best plan to get them into the sack but with Hermione... He wanted to take it slow somehow... And he knew she liked that too...

Harry was brought out of his trance as he felt a soft pair of lips kiss his palm. Looking up, he saw Hermione looking at him with nothing more but understanding in her eyes, making all the icy barriers Harry had left around himself melt as he gave the girl another sweet smile in return.

Trying to break the tension, Hermione grinned at him, shrugging before she tucked a strand of her hair back behind her ear.

"My parents are dentists... They're not much I can say about them except, they are going to be sorely mad when they find out I have magically reduced my teeth... They had wanted me to wear braces like everybody else." Hermione told him, smiling.

Harry let out a chuckle, raising an eyebrow. "It suits you though Hermione... I'm not just saying it but you really do look beautiful..." He said, another tint of pink staining his cheeks.

Hermione felt the blood rush to her cheeks as well but she laughed and smiled at him, touched by the sincerity of his words. "Thanks, Harry... You're the first person to actually tell me that... Well, other than my parents of course." She added, rolling her eyes.

Harry looked at her as though she was nuts, his eyes wide in disbelief. "You mean, neither Weasley nor Finnegan ever let you know that you were very attractive?" He asked incredulously.

Hermione blushed darker, shaking her head furiously. "They... Don't see me that way, Harry... They never did... To me, I'm just *one of the boys* or just *their best friend*... I don't think they even realize that I'm a girl." She kidded, rolling her eyes.

Harry looked furious, his features scrunching up in a growl.

"But... That's just... *wrong*, Hermione! You should know exactly how gorgeous you are and I can't believe that Weasel and that little Irish leprechaun never failed to notice that!" He raged, his eyes blazing.

Hermione looked at him in slight amusement, feeling her heart jump lightly at the heartwarming yet amusing gesture of indignation from Harry.

"Well, its' not really their fault Harry... I can understand if they don't really see me that way... I mean, I know I'm not exactly as beautiful as Parvati or Fleur but I've never really did make my presence as a girl show much..." She admitted sheepishly.

Harry still looked slightly indignant, his eyes narrowed. "Then that was their own bloody ignorance... Look Hermione, as much as I have been trying to hide it from you or everyone else, I have always found you very beautiful..." He said softly, looking away.

Hermione's eyes widened as she looked at him, biting her lip as she checked to make sure she had heard him right.

"What?"

Harry's blush intensified, as he hastily began fiddling around with his spoon and fork in an effort to hide from her gaze.

“Hermione... I just can’t help feeling a bit pissed off at your friends for that... Had they been that stupid never to realize how much of a beautiful and gorgeous girl you are? You deserved to know that... Weasley and Finnegan don’t know what they’re missing.” He said, looking up at her intently.

Hermione felt her heart leap up again in surprise but she gave him a small smile in return. “I had never expected that you of all people would be the one to tell me that... I think I like this side of you better, Harry.” She teased, smiling.

Harry lifted one side of his lips into a half-smile, shrugging.

“I was only speaking the truth... Alright, so maybe I don’t have a right to act so high and mighty all of a sudden since I have tormented you for years now but I guess I was just trying to fight back my growing attraction to you ...” He admitted, sighing.

Hermione didn’t say anything but just looked at him with an unreadable kind of emotion in her eyes, her beautiful features glowing in anticipation.

“Hell... Maybe, I kind of owe both Weasley and Finnegan a favor for not seeing you that way... If they had, I would have probably never had the chance to be with you right now... the stupid losers...” Harry said, smirking.

Hermione couldn’t prevent a laugh, shaking her head as Harry grinned back at her in amusement.

“Though... I have to admit... I’m rather thankful for them not noticing you too... That way, I’d be the first one to finally let Hermione Granger realize that she is the most beautiful girl I have ever laid eyes on.” Harry said, lifting her hand to his lips and kissing each of her fingers tenderly.

Hermione felt her eyes sting slightly with touched tears but she held them back, giving Harry a smile of absolute affection. “T-thank you... Harry...” She managed to whisper, turning away so he couldn’t see the tears that were threatening to fall down her cheeks.

Harry did notice however, but didn't say anything as he gently pulled out a pure white handkerchief from his robes and tilted Hermione's chin up to meet his gaze, gently wiping the cascading tears down her cheeks with the soft fabric.

The warm gesture was enough to make Hermione tear up again but she let out a weak laugh and smiled at him, taking the handkerchief from his hand and dabbing at her eyes, savoring the sweet, scent of Harry's handkerchief that reminded Hermione of its owner.

"I-I'm sorry, I'll return the handkerchief to you after I get it washed." She said, giving him a sheepish smile. Harry shook his head, stroking her cheek again. "You can keep it if you want..." He whispered, an unreadable expression in his face.

Hermione sniffed but nodded, too stunned to say anything else as the waiter finally arrived at their table, setting their food down on the carefully.

Hermione turned away so the waiter couldn't see her tear-stained eyes, waiting after he left before she turned to meet Harry again, who was looking at her with a twinkle of humor in his own eyes.

"Never knew you were sensitive about those kinds of things, Hermione..." He teased, smiling before he brought a forkful of his food up to his lips.

Hermione gave him a mock glare, scowling as she wiped her eyes dry before beginning to eat as well. "Don't you tease me, Harry... You know it's not nice to make fun of a sensitive woman..." She kidded, shaking her head in disbelief.

Harry's eyes sparkled again, this time in mock suspicion. "*You're* a woman?" He asked, earning him a light punch on the shoulder from the Gryffindor, causing him to yelp out loud and wince in pain.

Hermione hid her giggles behind her hand as the people in the restaurant turned to give Harry a stern glare, causing the boy to sink in his seat in embarrassment, glaring at Hermione.

"You're lucky I don't hit girls, Ms. Granger." He threatened, scowling childishly again as he rolled his eyes at her.

Hermione actually smirked at him, nearly causing Harry to choke on his food in surprise before her face turned serious again, looking at him with such a tender emotion that made his heart jump into his throat.

"Harry... Did you really mean what you said? About me being beautiful or were you saying that just to make me feel better?" She asked uncertainly, as though she was afraid of the answer.

Harry's facial features softened as he looked up and gave the girl a reassuring smile, gently stroking her bottom lip with his thumb as he did.

"Of course I did, Hermione... You know what I think? What I find so beautiful about you is that you don't flaunt your beauty just like everyone else... You don't use your beauty as a weapon to get you what you want... Unlike Patil, or Parkinson or those other girls, the beauty I see in you isn't cheap or overused or even forced... The beauty I see in you is pure and untainted... Innocent... And what makes you even more beautiful is that you hardly know you are at all..." He explained intently, looking deep into her eyes as they began to water again.

As soon as the words had left his lips, Harry wished he could take them back again... He hadn't even known he could say something like that... He didn't even *want* to know how he could say something like that....

Never, in his entire life had he said something that... That *sentimental* to a girl... He had no idea where those words had come from or what had inspired him to say them... They had rushed out of him as though they had a mind of their own and he knew he couldn't take them back...

He was pretty sure that if Draco or even his sister could have heard those words from *him* of all people, they would have laughed out loud right in his face!



Hell, he hadn't even known that he could say something that long without a swear word, malice, anger or hatred in them... His words had actually been dripping with... With... *love*... Harry could hardly believe it himself... And... Surprising himself even more... He realized one thing.... *It had felt good*...

Hermione finally let out a laugh again, breaking Harry's train of thought as she shook her head and hastily wiped her eyes with the handkerchief he had given her earlier, looking embarrassed with herself.

"We had better put this conversation on hold if we want actually want to finish dinner." Hermione finally said, grinning sheepishly at the Slytherin.

Harry grinned back, nodding. "I agree... How about after dinner, we take that stroll around the town as we planned... The moon is out tonight and I'm sure moonlight would be romantic." He said softly.

Hermione blushed, nodding silently. She didn't know why but she had a feeling this date was just starting and already...

Glancing back up at Harry's breathtakingly handsome features as he offered another smile at her again... She knew...

She had a sinking feeling of regret but she knew... She was indeed... Falling... And falling hard... *Head over Heels*... in love with Harry Potter...

"I've never really had any fond memories of my childhood at all... There was nothing worth remembering about it..." Harry said softly as he and Hermione both walked hand in hand through the peaceful village, their fingers intertwined once again, enjoying the soft glow of the moonlight and the beautiful stars up in the sky.

Deciding to leave their things with Steve at the restaurant, the couple had decided to remove their robes and walk around in their muggle clothing, enjoying the cool night breeze.

Now, Hermione was wearing a beautiful cream-colored, knee-length sleeveless dress which accentuated her slender curves nicely and

showed off her delicate shoulders yet still gave her a look of elegance and sophistication.

Though the dress was simple enough in itself and didn't show off as much as some of the kinds of dresses the other girls wore, it was purely beautiful on Hermione, portraying the very innocence and refinement of the wearer itself...

The wind was blowing softly against her, causing a few strands of her brown hair to fly freely from her delicate face as her eyes sparkled with such life that Harry couldn't take his eyes off her. He marveled at how he had never truly noticed how much more beautiful Hermione was than all the other girls he had gone out with before... Her beauty came naturally... It was addictive...

Around the village, they could also see some of the other villagers walking around as well, enjoying the calm night sky and the beautiful lights around the entire village where dimly lit lamp posts stood on the streets, casting a romantic glow on the path they took.

From where the couple was walking, Harry could also see that the trees around the village had been magically enchanted with beautiful lights, sparkling every now and then as a sight they had often stopped and admired as they passed.

The beautiful pathway they were following was also illuminated with sparkling, magical lights as well, helping the couple to see where the path was going and adding the needed romantic mood to the beautiful scene.

A grin on his face, Harry lifted his wand and conjured up a single white rose from its tip, handing the rose to Hermione, who blushed but took it, gently caressing the delicate flower with her hand as she took in its pure scent.

"Why is that, Harry?" Hermione asked, daintily breaking off the stem of the rose and putting it onto her hair, earning her a fond smile from the Slytherin boy beside her as he squeezed her hand in response.

Harry sighed before he tugged on her hand, the couple continuing to walk down the path again as he tried to find the right words to say.

“Well... I’m sure by now; you’ve heard that we live with our muggle relatives, right?” He asked her, both of them taking slow, small footsteps along the trail.

Hermione nodded, looking at him in concern.

“Well... You see, the Dursleys were never really what AJ and I would have called *family*...Through our entire childhood... They treated us like we were lowlife servants...” He said darkly, a trace of bitterness in his voice.

Hermione’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh Harry... I—”

“Basically, just to sum it all up, they made our childhood a living hell... I never wanted to remember any of it at all... Nothing of our childhood was worth keeping as a sacred moment.... Everything was mostly abuse and maltreatment... You had no idea how happy my sister and I were when we learned we were magical... It was a miracle to finally get away from those people... To finally have our own lives without them...” He explained, sighing heavily.

Hermione nodded again, not saying anything but just listening to him in understanding, letting him speak freely.

“They just ruined our childhood years... You would think our youth would have been a very important part of our lives but now, AJ and I try our best to forget all about it... It was way too painful... That’s why at the end of our first year, we showed those Dursleys exactly how powerful the Potter twins were.” Harry concluded, flashing Hermione his trademark Slytherin sneer.

Hermione looked shocked but laughed, shaking her head. “You didn’t hurt them, did you?” She asked in alarm.

Harry just grinned evilly again, shaking his head. “Of course not... We just... scared them out of their wits... They wouldn’t dare cross us again now and that’s one of things I’m thankful of having...” He told her, shrugging.

Hermione nodded again but couldn't help shuddering as she briefly let go of Harry's hand and wrapped her arms around her, trying to warm herself up.

Harry's emerald orbs clouded over in concern and he turned to face her, a worried look on his handsome features. "Now, are you cold?" He asked, gently running his hands up and down her bare arms to warm her.

Hermione shivered again but this time, not out of the cold night but out of the way Harry's hands were sending goose bumps down her spine from where he touched her. "A-a little..." She admitted, holding back another shiver.

Harry didn't answer as he took a step back from her and peeled off his green sweater, revealing a white t-shirt he wore underneath and briefly exposing a small amount of his lean chest as he did, making Hermione's eyes widen and her cheeks flush slightly.

*Bad Hermione...Bad thoughts... Bad thoughts...* She thought to herself, shaking her head to clear them away.

Harry offered her an affectionate smile before he draped the sweater over Hermione's slender frame, wrapping both his arms around her waist and pulling her to him from behind, her back pressing comfortably onto his chest.

Leaning down and resting his chin on her slender shoulder, Harry turned his head to give her a reckless grin, tucking strand of hair behind her ear as he did. "Better?" He whispered, his lips caressing her soft cheek tenderly.

Hermione nodded, her throat too tight to speak as she closed her eyes and leaned into Harry's strong yet gentle embrace, enjoying the feeling of his arms wrapped around her waist. She pulled the sweet-smelling sweater tighter over herself, her skin savoring the soft feel of sweater's fabric.

The couple stayed in that position for a long time in silence, not caring if the other wizards or witches who were passing by saw them,

Harry resting his cheek on Hermione's hair, enjoying the silky feel of her hair against his skin.

Resting there for a long time and not hearing anything else except the sound of their steady breathing, their bodies barely moved at all as they just savored the feel of the other... Both of them feeling such warmth, comfort and security than they had ever felt in their lives...

Hermione sighed softly, inhaling once again the sweet scent of Harry himself which was on his sweater, as she enjoyed the feeling of security she found in the handsome Slytherin's arms... Frankly, Harry's gentlemanly act had caught her off guard...

Yet... She couldn't recall ever feeling as safe as she was feeling right now, wrapped in Harry's arms and enjoying the feel on his skin on hers, knowing he was just there and he wasn't going to do anything to hurt her at all...

After several more quiet yet relaxing and serene minutes, Harry finally broke the trance, pulling away from Hermione with an almost sad, longing look in his eyes. Clearing his throat, he forced a laugh out to break the mood.

*I can't get too close to her... Remember what I'm supposed to do... I have to watch myself... I cannot develop even more feelings for her...* Harry thought weakly, trying to shake away the aching feeling in his chest as he cleared his throat again, giving Hermione a grin.

"So... Uh, Hermione, I think I've talked enough about my childhood, why don't you tell me a little bit about yours?" Harry asked, trying to start up a casual conversation between them.

Hermione smiled, pulling the sweater over herself again as they began to continue down the path, breathing in the fresh breeze.

"Well... There's not much to tell... My childhood wasn't really that interesting, Harry... All I ever did was study, study, study... I was way too serious about my schoolwork and my grades back then." Hermione answered, shrugging.

Harry raised an eyebrow in question. "Was?" He asked curiously. Hermione rolled her eyes, laughing.

"Fine, I still am, I guess but not as much as I was before when I was a child. I wanted to be on top of everyone in my class so I made sure I knew every single lesson there was before anyone else did... Give me a break, I'm a perfectionist." She defended.

Harry smirked, shaking his head. "So I've noticed..." He said wryly, earning him another light punch from the Gryffindor.

"You're one to talk, Mr. Harry Potter... It seems you have everything on you... The looks, the charms, the money, the power... Could have been perfect if you weren't a jerk." Hermione teased, smiling at him.

Harry looked at her in surprise, secretly offended by her words. "You still think so?" He asked.

Hermione's gaze softened as she grabbed his hand and intertwined their fingers once again, giving him a look of apology. "Of course not, Harry. I was just kidding... You may have been before but you're not anymore... I'm glad I'm finally getting to know you..." She said softly, kissing his cheek.

*I am too...* He thought silently but he didn't dare say the thought out loud as he just smiled at the girl in response, squeezing her hand again before he continued walking.

"So... Harry, I've always been rather curious..." Hermione started, giving him a speculative look.

Harry looked back at her in expectation, both his eyebrows raised in question.

"How do you survive in such a wild, notorious house such as Slytherin? Isn't it hard to keep up with everyone there?" Hermione asked, her eyebrows fused together.

Harry smirked in amusement, shaking his head.

“Not really... You just have to make sure everyone recognizes who you are and you don’t let anyone push you around because otherwise, you wouldn’t last there at all... Besides, Slytherin house was the only and best family AJ and I had ever had... The Dursleys were never a family to us at all...” Harry’s voice trailed off for a moment before he continued.

“Slytherin accepted us... Took us in... Created us in their proud, powerful image and we are thankful for that kind of security... We’re not really the dark wizards everyone knows us as... Sure, we *are* nasty and cruel most of the time but most of us hate Voldemort and would do anything to stop him.” Harry said, his eyes blazing.

“Like Malfoy?” Hermione asked in disbelief. Harry let out a faint smile, shaking his head firmly.

“Draco’s been my best and most loyal friend ever since I entered the wizarding world... Contrary to what other people may think our friendship is, he almost seems like a brother to me already and I happen to know that he hates the dark lord as much as I do... He would never serve him...” Harry told her confidently.

“How can you be so sure, Harry?” Hermione asked doubtfully, not wanting to believe the Malfoy actually opposed the dark lord himself.

“*Because...* I know Draco and he’s not like that... He may be a bloody jerk at times but I happen to know that he’s not the type of person who would succumb to being a blind follower of Voldemort... He and I are similar in many ways... I have a lot of respect for him.” He assured her, smirking.

Hermione didn’t say anything, trying to take in what Harry had said but before she could prevent herself, another question escaped her lips. “But his father is a death eater isn’t he?” She asked but Harry had already walked off again as though he had deliberately avoided her question, turning around to flash her a curious grin.

“So, what about you? How do you *survive* with such friends as Weasel and the Leprechaun?” He asked sarcastically, earning him a glare from Hermione.

*“Ron and Seamus have been my best friends since first year and though I admit, I do have a lot of fun with them and they are very supportive and caring about me... I would be lying if I say they really, truly understood me as best friends should...”* Hermione said sadly, sighing.

Harry gave her a look of surprise. “Really? Why is that?” He asked.

“Well... I’ve never actually achieved that certain feeling of ease and familiarity between them as I should have and I’m not that comfortable with telling them about the personal aspects of my life... I know they wouldn’t understand me anyway... It’s almost as if I’m sometimes just the third wheel in the friendship...” Hermione explained, shrugging as they turned on the path, admiring the beautiful lights around them.

“I see... I know what you mean... There are some things that I can only tell my twin sister alone since she’s the only one who can really understand me... Not that Draco doesn’t understand me but there are just some things you can only tell certain people...” Harry said, fiddling with his pendant as they walked.

Hermione nodded, sighing wistfully.

“That’s another thing, Harry... That’s the reason I’ve always been jealous of you and Ron and all the others who have siblings... I’ve never had a sibling since I’m an only child and I have always longed for a sister or at least, a female best friend...” She said.

Harry smiled at her, giving her an amused look. “Why is that?” He asked curiously.

“Because guys just can’t understand girls that much... They can never fill that empty part of me that yearns for female companionship... Hell, can you believe that I actually thought that your twin and I could become friends in our first year?” She said, shaking her head at herself.

Harry laughed, shrugging.



“Hey, you never know, Hermione, after all, I wouldn’t be surprised if that *did* happen now that *you* and *I* are actually lasting a long conversation without biting each other’s heads off... I never knew that *this* was possible too... Plus, you and AJ are alike in a lot of ways, actually... You could become good friends.” He said, smirking.

Hermione raised an eyebrow in doubt. “You think so?” She asked in surprise.

*Not really...* Harry couldn’t help thinking, hiding a grin but he shrugged again, offering a smirk. “It could happen.” He concluded, grinning.

Hermione just rolled her eyes again, laughing as Harry briefly admired how melodious her laughter sounded before he shook his head furiously, disgusted at himself for acting so idiotic. “Okay, my turn to ask a question.” Hermione said, grinning mischievously at him.

Harry arched an eyebrow, rolling his eyes. “Shoot.” He said smoothly.

“Okay... Exactly *how many* girls have you actually dated in the past?” She asked, looking as though she was expecting to hear the worst come out of the Slytherin’s mouth.

Harry’s handsome face broke out into the Potter sneer, a smug look in his eyes as he looked at the Gryffindor girl in front of him easily. “Plenty.” Was all he said, chuckling lightly as he continued walking, leaving Hermione hurrying after him.

“Aw, come on, Harry! I’m just curious... Who were they?” She asked, a faint hint of jealousy in her voice but Harry didn’t seem to notice it, laughing at her intense interest at the question.

“Fine... To be honest, I’ve lost count, I wasn’t exactly listing them down but the ones I remember were Pansy Parkinson, Lila Perrine, Lavender Brown, Lisa Turpin, Mandy Brocklehurst, Parvati and Padma Patil... Erargh, *why* am I telling you this?” Harry suddenly realized, shaking his head furiously at himself.

Hermione’s eyes had widened to the size of saucers. “You had a relationship with *both* Patil twins?” She asked incredulously.

Harry just smirked again, shaking his head as he did. “*Both* not that impressive, I can assure you... It wasn’t a good experience... I’m trying to forget about both actually.” He said.

“Why did you break up with Parvati?” She asked curiously. Harry sighed, turning away from her so he couldn’t see the longing he was trying to hide in his eyes. “Because... I couldn’t pretend with her anymore...” He answered simply, making it sound like the topic was more or less over.

Silence dawned upon the two as they resumed walking again before Harry spoke up again, looking at Hermione with a teasing grin on his face. “So... How about you, Hermione? Any past flings?” Harry asked, his hands slowly clenching themselves into a tight, deadly fist.

Hermione blushed crimson, looking away instantly as her face burned in embarrassment. “No... I... I’ve never been in a relationship before...” She answered shyly, not meeting his gaze.

Harry felt a strong feeling of relief but his eyes bulged out, looking at her in shock.

“*Never?*”

Hermione blushed darker, laughing at herself. “Well... There was this one thing in third year when this one guy and I shared a sort of *mutual understanding* but that was it... Didn’t get much further than that... It was nothing really...” She said, shrugging.

“Do I know him?” Harry asked curiously, his eyes narrowing themselves dangerously in secret anger.

“Actually... You do... It’s Terry Boot...” She said, too embarrassed to meet the Slytherin’s gaze.

Harry’s eyes flashed. “That shrimpy little Ravenclaw geek?!” He growled, his face twisting into a hideous snarl of anger.

Hermione didn’t notice his anger, letting out another soft chuckle.

“He’s not a geek, he was just really smart and the funny thing is...I just never really *like-liked* him... I just assumed I did or I thought I did because he seemed like the type of guy that would match me or would be my type...” She explained.

Harry looked at her in confusion. “Why would you assume that?” He prodded on.

Hermione sighed, tucking a long strand of her long hair behind her ear as the couple stopped abruptly where the path ended right in front of a beautiful sparkling white marble fountain.

The fountain was shaped like a cupid, the water glistening beautifully in the moonlight and several other sparkling lights adorned around the cupid statue. Hermione tried to ignore the fact that the arrow that the Cupid was holding was aimed right where she was standing.

“Because... that’s what everyone always assumes about me so / assumed that about me as well... I never thought I’d actually go for the aggressive Slytherin type like you.” She said, plopping herself down the ledge of the fountain.

As soon as the words she had just let slip registered into her mind, Hermione’s eyes widened as she turned away from the smirking Slytherin in front of her, her cheeks now burning intensely with humiliation and embarrassment.

*Way to go, Hermione...* A voice inside her head nagged, annoying her even more at her foolish little slip-up.

Thankfully, Harry didn’t say anything as he just sat down beside her, taking her hand in his again and lifting it up to his lips to give it a kiss, letting his lips linger on her hand for a long moment before he intertwined their fingers once again, smiling at her.

More to ignore the knowing smile on Harry’s face than anything else, Hermione brought up another question again, asking the first thing that came into her mind.

“So... Uhm...I’m just curious... Why exactly had there always been this childish rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin? Is it a law of Hogwarts or something that those two houses were meant to fight every time?” She asked curiously, trying to draw away the topic again.

Harry quirked his lips into a lopsided smile, chuckling slightly at her question.

“I guess you could say that... Let’s just say... The personalities of the two houses clash too much; similar to how Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor fought a lot themselves... Although, I have to point out, ever since Draco and I came into Slytherin, Gryffindor has been losing a lot of those rivalries lately.” Harry said arrogantly, smirking.

Hermione rolled her eyes, looking at him with a stern expression on her face. “Oh come on, yeah right, if I recall, there were a *lot* of times Ron, Seamus and I beat you, Malfoy and AJ before.” She pointed out smugly.

Harry snorted derisively, holding back his laughter as Hermione flushed indignantly in anger before she shrugged and let out a laugh, causing Harry to join in afterwards.

“For what it’s worth Hermione, I don’t really understand why you hang out with those two... You could do so much better... To me, you’re the only Gryffindor that actually has a good head on her shoulders.” Harry told her, smirk still on his face.

Hermione whacked him on the arm playfully, shaking her head. “Well thanks a lot...I think.” She replied sarcastically, laughing. Harry held up his hands in a mock innocent look, widening his eyes.

Hermione just rolled eyes in annoyance again, looking away briefly for a moment before she looked back at the Slytherin curiously, who was gazing up at the beautiful night sky. Taking a deep breath, Hermione looked at him intently. “Harry, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you ever since our first year...” She said, her voice trailing off.

Harry looked back at her, nodding for her to continue. “Okay...” He replied, raising an eyebrow curiously.

Hermione fused her own eyebrows together and looked at him with a solemn expression in her eyes.

“Well...What exactly do you and your sister see in front of a dementor that causes you both to faint?” She asked softly, squeezing his hand. Harry’s emerald eyes hardened for a second as he flinched back as though he had been stunned and turned away, not meeting Hermione’s eyes.

“Nothing, I—”

“Come on, Harry... You can tell me...” Hermione urged gently, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Harry’s form tensed in anger before he let out a sigh and relaxed weakly, finally lifting his gaze up to meet Hermione’s questioning eyes.

“I... Oh fine, we don’t see anything... We just *hear*...We hear our mother screaming for our father...For mercy...For our lives... Begging that bastard not to kill us... But most of all... We hear her dying... We hear her breathing her last breath of life before that bastard laughs... Just *laughs*...” Harry said darkly, his eyes glinting in absolute hatred.

Hermione didn’t or couldn’t say anything at all in total shock.... She just squeezed his hand tightly, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Do you know what it’s like to hear your mother die over and over again? Do you even know how horrifying that seems? To hear your mother scream again and again in your head yet you know there was nothing you could do but listen?” Harry whispered, his voice barely audible.

Hermione kept silent, knowing that the question wasn’t meant to be answered.

“That’s what it’s like... That’s how it’s always been... But not anymore if I have anything to do about it...” He added under his breath, his eyes glinting coldly in the dark night but Hermione knew better than to

prod him about it, merely holding his hand before slowly looking up at him.

“How do you manage to fight the dementors?” She asked, her forehead creasing as she began examining Harry’s pendant absently.

Harry let out a smirk, shrugging. “Prof. Lupin taught me the *Expecto Patronum* defense spell in third year... I’ve used that ever since as my only weapon against the dementors...” He answered.

Hermione’s eyes widened in disbelief and awe just as she looked at him in surprise. “You did?! Harry, that’s a very advanced spell! You must be very powerful! Now I know why everyone keeps saying that you’ll become one of the most powerful wizards of all time in the future...” She said, smiling.

Harry just raised an eyebrow, sighing. “I’m sure they do...” He muttered under his breath, shaking his head. Hermione sobered immediately, deciding it would probably not be the best time to tell Harry that at the moment.

“It’s not really much a big deal anyway... Draco and I learn a lot of difficult spells all the time when we could... I won’t lie to you though, Mione, we *do* engage ourselves in the dark arts and everything but unlike the others, we know our limitations... We know how to control that kind of magic...” Harry told her, a reckless grin on his lips.

Hermione jaw was hanging open. “But, Harry, nothing good will come out of the dark arts! I read somewhere that—”

But Harry held a hand up, causing Hermione to stop midsentence and sigh, giving in.

“I will not listen to any lectures about this, I know what the fuck I’m doing and I don’t need advice. Can we please talk about something else?” Harry interrupted abruptly, his features tense and rigid.

Hermione nodded reluctantly, keeping quiet until Harry spoke up again, his features relaxing as he flashed her a teasing grin. “So, how about you, Mione.... I’m pretty sure you’ve read up and learned a lot of other spells from advanced books as well...” He said, smiling.

Hermione shook her head, giving him a weak smile. “Well... I *have* tried reading really advanced books with spells but I never could manage to learn such hard, powerful spells by myself as naturally as others do... Or at least, not as naturally as *you* do...” She corrected, laughing.

Harry chuckled lightly, shaking his head.

“Kind of like the way *flying* never came naturally to me... I was never really much of an athletic type girl... Plus, I have a terrible fear of heights...” She told him, shaking her head at herself.

Harry looked at her intently.

“Really? That’s too bad, Hermione... Flying can really relax you... There’s nothing more I’ve always enjoyed more than anything than soaring up in the sky on my Firebolt... I have always *loved* that feeling of flying with the wind blowing in your face... Hey, Maybe I’ll teach you some other time...” He offered, grinning.

Hermione smiled back, blushing. “I’d like that...” She replied softly, both of them staring into each other’s eyes intently for a long moment before Harry broke the gaze reluctantly, clearing his throat.

“*Eyes on me...*” Hermione whispered under her breath, smiling at Harry. Harry snapped his attention back to her at hearing her words, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Excuse me?”

Hermione’s smile grew as she looked deep into Harry’s beautiful emerald orbs again, admiring how they were shining at her.

“Nothing really... It’s just that... I’ve always thought your eyes are quite beautiful Harry... I’ve always loved it when you looked at me in the eye because then I can see how yours sparkle... I’ve loved having your eyes on me...” Hermione whispered, stroking his cheek.

As much as he tried to prevent it, Harry felt his cheeks blush intensely, feeling his heart squeeze rather painfully in his chest. “T-That’s a muggle song...” He whispered, his voice slightly shaking.

Hermione's smile never left her face as she nodded, blushing slightly. "Why, yes... It is... I'm surprised you know it...I never thought you actually listened to muggle music..." She marveled.

Harry nodded, his fingers caressing her hand in an affectionate manner. "You like that song?" He asked, managing a small smile.

Hermione grinned in response, looking away as her fingers absently played with a lock of her hair. "My favorite one... Even more now since whenever I hear it... It will remind me of you and your eyes..." She said, blushing darker.

Despite his weak, trembling form, Harry managed a weak grin, his throat dry as he forced the words out. "I didn't know you listened to muggle music either..." He said.

Hermione nodded sheepishly, chuckling. "I've always loved music... I'm an absolute sucker for music... I mean, the best thing a guy could ever do for me is to sing for me...I guess I'm a hopeless romantic at heart... Music helps calm my soul and soothes my heart... It brings out all the emotions I try to keep pent up." She said softly, looking away.

Harry gently turned her face towards his, gently running a finger down her cheek as he leaned forward and planted a soft, very brief kiss on her lips.

"I'll work on it for now but hey, maybe one day, I'll be crazy enough to sing you a song." He kidded, smirking at her as Hermione let out a weak laugh, whacking him lightly on the shoulder.

Harry's teasing face suddenly turned serious for a minute as he looked intently at Hermione, a small, apologetic smile on his face.

"Hermione... I'm sorry about all those horrible stuff I did or said to you before in the past... I regret all of that now... You didn't deserve any of it at all... You're such a wonderful person... You *never* deserved to be treated like that." He said, planting a kiss on her cheek.

Hermione sighed, waving it off as she felt her heart leap up secretly at Harry's tender words and actions. "Forget it, Harry... It's in the



past... It's happened and it's over. There's no point in letting the past control us... It's time we moved on from those childish rivalries." She said, giving him a comforting smile.

Harry sighed, shaking his head. "Oh, and about yesterday... I'm really sorry for what I snapped to you but you see, Draco and Weasley were there and they might have gotten suspicious if I hadn't said anything—"

"Harry, it's okay. It's fine, I don't blame you for what happened. That's why I covered for you... And... It was really sweet of you to still apologize to me in front of them... I appreciate that..." Hermione interrupted, squeezing his hand.

Harry looked relieved, letting out a breath of air, laughing at himself.

"If it'll help, I'm sorry too for all the pranks Ron, Seamus and I may have pulled on you and your friends too..." Hermione offered but Harry looked at her in confusion, raising an eyebrow.

"But... You guys never managed to pull *anything* on us Slytherins anyway... We were always one step ahead of you." He denied, smirking.

Hermione narrowed her eyes irritably, scowling at him. "You were not, we pulled a lot of meaner pranks on you Slytherins before!" She said in mild indignation, making Harry's eyes flash dangerously.

The two glared at each other in anger and tension for a minute, each one not saying anything before Hermione's lips twitched slightly, making them both burst out into laughter, amused at their own senseless arguing.

After their laughter had subsided, Hermione gave Harry a playful smile, a gleam of mischief in her warm chocolate brown eyes. "Okay, *last* question... I've always wondered... Who was the first girl you ever kissed when you came to Hogwarts?" She asked, a teasing hint in her voice.

"Oh fuck..." Harry cursed under his breath, burying his head in his hands in an attempt to hide his face.

Hermione couldn't help giggling, enjoying the way Harry was squirming in discomfort. "Okay, let me guess then..." She suggested, grinning.

Harry raised his head up again and managed a lopsided grin, shaking his head. "I don't like this but go ahead and give it a shot." He agreed reluctantly, sighing in exasperation.

Hermione laughed again but nodded and gave him a smug smile. "Millicent Bulstrode."

"*Fuck NO!*" Harry exploded, causing Hermione to collapse in a fit of hysterical laughter, burying her face in Harry's sweater to muffle her giggles.

Harry glared warningly at her as her laughter subsided and she gave him another smug look, nodding to assure him that she was okay.

A smirk actually formed itself onto her lips as the words came out of her mouth. "Prof. McGonagall."

"*HERMIONE!*" Harry growled, looking like he had eaten a flobberworm, making Hermione laugh again at how funny his handsome face had looked at the idea.

"It's *not* a professor, okay? I'm not a desperate fool... You forget, you're talking to Harry Potter here." Harry snarled, causing Hermione to roll her eyes but smile in secret agreement.

"Oh, I was just teasing you, Harry... Um, Cho Chang?" She guessed, shrugging.

Harry sighed, shaking his head as his face burned in embarrassment. Hermione barely heard the name of the person he mumbled under his breath before Harry covered his face up with his hands.

"*Pansy Parkinson?!*" Hermione gasped, looking disgusted.

Harry's head snapped back up and he glared at Hermione in mock righteous anger. "Hey, give me a break! I was a kid then and the girl

just practically pounced herself on me that I had no choice..." He muttered, looking away.

Hermione still looked disgusted and if Harry had looked at her, he would have noticed the look of spite and jealousy in the Gryffindor's brown eyes as she shook her head repeatedly. Harry then turned to give Hermione a smirk, raising his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

"My turn to guess *your* first kiss." He said, grinning.

Hermione's cheeks turned a dark shade of crimson as she thought of the answer to that one, avoiding his gaze.

"You don't have to rub that in, Harry..." She mumbled but Harry was still grinning impishly, a twinkle of laughter in his eyes.

"Weasley?"

Hermione just let out a snort, rolling her eyes.

"Finnegan?" He pressed on, edging closer to Hermione with his eyes trained on her luscious lips.

Hermione was about to snap at him when she finally looked up and noticed that Harry was right next to her now, their faces mere inches apart as his hand stroked her cheek gently, his other arm wrapping itself around her slender waist.

Just as his lips were nearly touching hers, they formed into a smile, finally whispering the right answer.

"Or... *Me...*" He murmured before claiming her lips passionately with his own, his arms around her tightening and the hand that had been stroking her cheek stroking her long hair.

Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled their faces closer together, leaning herself further into the embrace as she savored the burning yet passionate feeling of Harry's strong arms wrapped around her form.

Harry pulled away slowly, opening his eyes for a brief moment as his lips formed an amused smirk over hers and just as Hermione opened her eyes to ask him why he had pulled back, his lips pressed themselves against hers again, this time the kiss being much deeper and ravenous than the first.

Hermione felt her head spinning and her knees weakening as the kiss grew more and more forceful and demanding, Harry's lips kissing hers with so much passion and intensity that she thought her heart was going to spontaneously combust from her chest from its rapidly growing beat.

As the kiss grew deeper and deeper, Hermione felt herself weakening with every moment, thankful that they were sitting down and for the strong arm Harry had around her waist to prevent her from collapsing lifelessly on the floor.

Harry was obviously the dominant force as he pressed their bodies closer together, his lips demanding more and more every minute as his hand moved once again behind her neck, massaging it gently, causing her to squirm uncomfortably just as before.

Finally remembering that they both needed air to breathe, Harry reluctantly slowed the kiss, letting it fade into a gentle caress before he finally pulled back, gazing at Hermione with an intense, *loving* look in his eyes as he pressed their foreheads together, both of them breathing hard, staring into each other's eyes.

"Wow..." Hermione managed to whisper, breathing heavily as she noticed the intense, tender and surprisingly, *longing* look in the Slytherin's eyes.

"Wow..." Harry agreed in a whisper as well, their foreheads still pressed close as his hand ran up and down Hermione's arm tenderly.

*I never knew a kiss could ever feel like that... Could be that passionate... That intense...* Hermione thought to herself, trying to catch her breath.

Harry managed to quirk his lips into a sideways grin, still panting for breath. "So... Did I guess right?" He asked, smirking.

Hermione smirked back, raising an eyebrow. "Third times the charm, *Potter...*" She answered, smiling.

No other words were spoken before the couple's lips met in another passionate, searing kiss, clearly unwilling to separate as they kissed each other in the cool, dark night, the beautiful moonlight illuminating the tender scene beneath them.

After they had gathered their stuff and robes back from the restaurant and had headed on back to Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione walked hand in hand once more down the empty, familiar corridors of Hogwarts, Harry checking the marauder's map once in a while to make sure no one saw them up.

"Thanks for such a beautiful evening Harry... I really had a good time tonight..." Hermione said softly, giving Harry a smile as they rounded the corner.

Harry returned the same smile back, his eyes sparkling with warmth and affection he didn't know he had. "It was my pleasure, Hermione... I'd really like to do this again sometime..." He responded, a faint tint of red on his cheeks.

"Yeah... Me too..." Hermione agreed sincerely, a happy glow on her features as she tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, looking away nervously.

For a moment, Harry just admired how beautiful Hermione was when a soft, tender smile lit up her delicate facial features... He hated to admit it but he had never seen anyone else who was as beautiful as Hermione was now...

She must have noticed that he was staring as she laughed at him, shaking her head and giving him a playful smile. "That's a really interesting way to catch flies, Harry." She teased, causing Harry to scowl in humiliation and shut his gaping jaw, looking away.

*What the hell is wrong with me? What is 'happening' to me?!* Harry thought in weak frustration as Hermione stopped them abruptly in the middle of a long, narrow corridor, turning around to give him a fond smile.

“Well... Tonight was... Really great... Such a memorable evening for me... Heck, I’ll admit... It was one of the best nights of my life... Thank you... Harry...” Hermione said affectionately, lifting up a hand to stroke his smooth cheek.

Harry leaned into the caress, reaching a hand up to place it over the one she had on his cheek and directing it to his lips to give it a kiss.

Hermione stared at him for a long time before she sighed and pulled her hand away, giving him a last smile. “Well... Uh, I better get going now... It’s pretty late... Thanks again Harry... Good—”

“Aw come on, Hermione... At least let me walk you to the entrance of your common room.” Harry said, raising his eyebrows.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, shaking her head. “No... Harry, that wouldn’t be such a good idea... It—”

Her voice trailed off when she noticed the rather cute, childish pout that was forming on the handsome Slytherin’s face, making her features soften as she sighed in reluctant agreement.

Giving in, she laughed, shaking her head at his antics. “Fine...” She said as she took the arm he offered and allowed him to lead her towards Gryffindor towers, their soft footsteps echoing through the silence of the halls.

When they had got there, Harry stopped them abruptly a slight distance away from the Fat Lady, making sure the painting couldn’t see them before he faced Hermione with a smile.

“Hermione... Remember what you said about not being able to fly?” Harry asked her, tucking a strand of her long brown hair behind her ear for her.

Hermione nodded, a confused look on her face. “Yes... Why?” She asked, raising an eyebrow.

Harry grinned. “Well... Cause... I was thinking if maybe you wanted me to teach you myself how to fly sometime... I want you to

experience the wonderful feeling I feel when I'm up in the air..." He said, stroking her cheek.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise and delight. "You mean it? You're actually willing to teach me yourself, Harry?" She asked, her eyes lighting up.

Harry laughed, nodding his head. "Of course... If you want me to of course... I guarantee you'll be perfectly safe, I—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence as Hermione threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly with a big smile on her face.

"Are you crazy, Harry?! Of course I would! How often does a girl get to be taught how to fly by the best flier in England? Thank you so much, Harry..." She exclaimed, her voice slightly muffled as she had her head buried in his chest.

Harry didn't say anything as he just held her close, enjoying the warmth radiating from her smaller form. When they had pulled back, Harry finally handed Hermione her robes, flashing her a grin.

"I don't even know why we both bothered wearing robes when we would spend most of the night in our muggle clothing." He remarked, making Hermione laugh.

"Oh... Yeah, before I forget, I better return your sweater to you... It's a really nice sweater... Thanks for letting me borrow it..." Hermione said, taking off the green sweater and handing it to him.

Harry didn't take it however as he just raised an eyebrow, smiling at her. "Do you like it?" He asked curiously.

Hermione shrugged, nodding as she chuckled lightly. "It's a beautiful sweater... And I like it very much... It's the same beautiful shade of green as your eyes, Harry so it kind of reminds me of you... Plus, it has your scent all over it..." She said, snuggling into the sweater briefly.

Harry made a face. "Did you just insult me or did you just give me a compliment?" He kidded, making her laugh out loud again.

"It was a compliment Harry... I think you smell very sexy..." Hermione teased, giving him a mockingly sexy wink before she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Harry grinned back, shrugging. "Well thank you very much, Ms. Granger, I think you smell rather sexy too... Kind of like strawberries." He said, winking as Hermione flushed deep red in humiliation, swatting him on the arm.

Harry laughed but gave her another one of his charming smiles, taking the sweater from Hermione's hands.

"Well I'm glad you like the sweater... It's my favorite actually... It's my favorite color and it *does* bring out my eyes but... I want you to keep it... I want you to have it." He said, taking the sweater and draping it around Hermione again.

Hermione's eyes widened like saucers, her throat too tight to speak. "Oh, but Harry! This is such a beautiful sweater, I couldn't possible take it from you... And it's your favorite..." She argued, trying to remove it but Harry shook his head firmly.

"No, Hermione, I *want* you to have it. Please, do... It would be my pleasure if you kept it." He said, grinning.

"B-but.... Harry, it must have been very expensive...And—"

Harry laughed, shrugging. "Yeah, it was but hey, I don't care about that. You're worth much more than that sweater, Hermione... Besides, I'm sure I can find another one just like it... But you... You are one in a million..." He said, tilting her chin up to meet his eyes again.

Hermione's knees weakened, turning her gaze away from him hastily to hide her blush. "And to think you're the same guy that tormented me for three years and cussed every five seconds... I never knew you were such a romantic, Potter..." She kidded, laughing weakly.

*Neither did I...* A voice spoke inside Harry's head but he ignored it, annoyed at himself.



"T-thank you.... Harry... For everything tonight." Hermione said, stepping closer to him to wrap her arms around his neck and rest her head on his chest.

Harry responded by wrapping his arms around her, looking straight ahead with a blank look on his face. His eyes clouded over in guilt and shame, making his insides churn in disgust. "You're... You're very welcome, Hermione..." He whispered back, sighing.

Hermione smiled as she listened to the soft beating of Harry's heart, letting it coax her into a relaxing mood before she pulled away again, pressing their foreheads together.

"I really like you Harry... You've made me feel something I never thought I could feel for you... You're such a great guy... I hope you know that." She told him, cupping his cheek with her hand.

Harry felt his throat run dry, looking away sharply from her gaze. "Yeah... Well, same here..." He managed to croak out, not having the courage to say anything else as he felt remorse flood his entire body.

Hermione just nodded, smiling again before she leaned forward and caught his lips in a soft, gentle kiss, snaking an arm around his neck to make him lean closer.

Harry kissed her back gently this time, each one taking their time to savor each other's gentle lips against their own for a long moment. It almost seemed as if both of them didn't want to break the kiss for fear that the magical night would finally come to an end.

After several more minutes, Harry finally pulled back, breathing heavily. He took a hesitant step back, nodding at her abruptly. "Well... We both better get going... I have a lot to do tomorrow..." Harry said, giving her a small smile.

Hermione nodded and before Harry could react, she leaned over and brushed her lips one last time against Harry's, smiling as she pulled back and turned around, slowly heading down the corridor towards the entrance of the Gryffindor Common Room.

Harry watched her go with a smile on his face from where he stood, watching as Hermione turned around one last time. "Good night, Harry... Sweet dreams..." She whispered, gently blowing a kiss at him.

"Sleep well, *beautiful*..." He whispered back, winking and offering a teasing smirk back in return.

Hermione shook her head in amusement before she disappeared into the Common Room, leaving in absolute silence.

*There is nothing really personal about this relationship... This is just a dare right? I can handle this... I'm not really starting to care for Granger...It's just part of the plan... I'm a damn good actor...* Harry thought, heading on back to the Slytherin dungeons while slipping his robes back over his muggle clothing.

But as he walked on in the darkness alone to his own thoughts, he noticed wasn't quite so sure of himself anymore... He had the strangest feeling that, like it or not, he was starting to lose to the battle...

**A/N:** Aw... Harry, baby, quit denying! You're falling for her, sweetheart! Hehe... I hope you guys don't mind also that I made the whole Hermione straightening her hair thing appear earlier in the story and I plan to have her hair now permanently that way! Oh and that song I mentioned was actually in the soundtrack of **FF8**, you all remember? ***Eyes on Me***? Damn, I love that song... **PLEASE REVIEW!! PLEASE!! MWAH!**

## Chapter 17- The Morning After

"Mione!! You awake yet?!" Ron hollered up towards the girls' dorms Sunday morning from where he and Seamus were playing chess in the Gryffindor common room. Seamus gave Ron a wry smile at the silent response, taking the opportunity of move one of Ron's chess pieces on the board.

"For all the four years we've known her mate, *never*, has Hermione ever been the last of the girls to wake up on Sunday morning." He pointed out, taking one of Ron's knight pieces casually, a grin on his face.

Ron snapped back to attention, shrugging nonchalantly as he took his turn before turning back to face the direction of the girls dorms again, his eyebrows fusing in confusion.

"I know... Seems to me she's the only one that's not yet here in the common room... Think she's alright?" He asked worriedly, his forehead creasing in concern and curiosity at the same time.

Seamus shrugged back, whistling casually again as he moved yet another piece of Ron's, grinning mischievously as he used it to his advantage in taking Ron's bishop piece this time.

"Maybe she stayed up all night studying or something... Not really much to worry about Ron, she's fine." Seamus reasoned as he gestured for Ron to take his turn again, whistling innocently.

Ron didn't look convinced, however, as he took his turn again in frustration, barely paying attention to the game as he ran a hand through his red disheveled red hair.

Seamus' eyes widened as he noticed the bruise on his best friend's face, standing out against his skin as a scowl as visible on the redhead's face. "Ron, where the bloody hell did you get that bruise?!" He exclaimed, fusing his eyebrows together as he peered at the other boy curiously.

Ron stiffened immediately, hastily shaking his head as he tried to cover up his bruise from view, frowning to himself. "It's nothing.

Seamus, I just had a little accident last night, no big deal.” He replied hastily, turning to look at the girls dorms again to see if Hermione had arrived.

Seamus raised an eyebrow, narrowing his eyes in suspicion as he surveyed Ron’s stiff form conspicuously. “Would this accident by any chance be in the form of Potter or Malfoy?” He asked directly, his voice sounding doubtful.

Ron ran a hand through his hair again, glaring down at the floor to hide his humiliation. “Which Potter?” He grumbled under his breath to no one in particular, a snarl forming on his face.

Seamus burst out into a reckless grin, bolting up from his seat and grabbing Ron by the collar, pulling him up along with him.

“No way! You sly charmer, you! You were with *AJ Potter* last night?!” He hissed excitedly, his eyes sparkling as his face clearly showed his demand for an explanation.

Ron blushed furiously, frantically shaking his head and making sure that no one else in the room had heard him, particularly Parvati and Lavender, who were in the corner of the room, whispering to themselves as they pretended to do their homework.

“No! Seamus, no! Nothing happened okay?! Just drop it!” Ron hissed, lightly shoving Seamus away and sitting back down, burying his face in his hands.

But Seamus was unrelenting, grinning from ear to ear as he sat down the chair beside Ron, briefly moving another chess piece before he turned to Ron with a serious expression on his face.

“Okay, Ron, mate, I’m your best friend and I *know* when you’re hiding something from me.” He said slowly, narrowing his eyes into slits as he glared at the other boy intently.

Ron paled this time, briefly making his freckles more visible before he shook his head and sighed, rubbing his forehead in annoyance.

“Seamus... Please, just drop it; I really don’t want to talk about it right now.” He grumbled, moving another chess piece absentmindedly in an attempt to hide his face from Seamus’ demanding glare.

“Checkmate.”

Seamus blinked, shaking his head to clear his thoughts before he rubbed his eyes and eyed the chessboard intently in irritation, seeing that indeed, Ron had won the game once again, making him curse in frustration.

Ron couldn’t help laughing, shaking his head as he stood up and made his way to walk over to the other corner of the common room away from the Parvati and Lavender, gesturing for Seamus to follow.

Seamus was still muttering darkly under his breath as he sat down, looking expectantly at Ron as the redhead sighed and gave him a reckless smile, shrugging.

“*Well?* What happened, mate? Did the older Potter twin give you that bruise or was it that git Malfoy?” Seamus prodded, raising both his eyebrows now.

“Seamus... Nothing happened okay? I was just walking around since I couldn’t get any sleep and I happened to see AJ Potter, walking in circles around *our* corridors, drunk as hell...” Ron started, whispering under his breath.

Seamus grinned slyly, nudging him. “A drunk AJ? What happened?” He pressed.

“Well... I couldn’t just leave her drunk like that! The Slytherins probably had another celebration where they all got drunk again as usual, to celebrate Potter’s victory...” Ron scowled at the thought, rolling his eyes.

“Anyway, I came to her and tried to escort her back to her own territory when all of a sudden... She... *comes* on to me like some drunken slut or something—”

“Hold on a minute there... You’re saying, she *came* onto you?” Seamus exclaimed out loud, making everyone in the common room to look at them in surprise and curiosity. Ron gave Seamus a warning glare in annoyance.

Seamus gave him a sheepish grin, shrugging. “Anyway, what happened mate?? You’re lucky, you know that, you wouldn’t want to know what *I* would have done if a drunk AJ came onto *me*.” He said, winking.

Ron paled, shaking his head. “You’re right... I *don’t*... Well, I tried to hold her off, see, she was drunk and out of her mind... She kept making these unnerving stares, *cuddling* me, hugging me, trying to *seduce* me...” Ron said, shuddering in what he assumed was only disgust.

Seamus’ eyes glazed over looking at Ron as though he had admitted he was a death eater. “Then?” He squeaked, a dreamy look in his eyes.

“Well... She... She actually... *kissed* me...” Ron said, his voice barely audible as he fiddled with his fingers uncomfortably, looking anywhere else except Seamus shocked stare.

“She *what??*” He burst out, this time causing Parvati and Lavender to glance at them accusingly, eyes both narrowed in suspicion and intrigue.

“Seamus, *shhh!!*” Ron hissed, putting his finger to his lips to shut his best friend up, looking around the common room in panic.

“But, are you telling me the truth?? She *kissed* you?! Merlin, how I would have *loved* to be in your shoes, mate!” Seamus whispered, grinning. “So did you kiss her back?” He prodded.

Ron sighed, slumping back in seat as he rubbed his forehead again.

“I... *yeah*, I did... But that was nothing, just brought up by the spur of the moment... And besides, soon after, the girl dropped, dead drunk. Of course, me being a gentleman and a complete idiot, I tried to bring

her back to the Slytherin common rooms myself but *that's* where I got attacked by Malfoy and Potter.” Ron said, looking disgusted.

Seamus laughed, slapping Ron's shoulder as his grin widened, looking at his best friend in admiration and jealousy at the same time. “Well... Proves one thing mate... You *fancy* her.” He said simply, clapping him lightly at the back again.

Ron's ears reddened as he frantically shook his head, looking horrified.

“No, I don't! I think she's attractive and very beautiful but I *don't* like her! She's a prat, an annoying witch and a snotty Slytherin git, no way!” Ron hissed angrily.

“Then why did you kiss her back?” Seamus asked pointedly, raising an eyebrow in accusation.

“Because, I'm *attracted* to her. There's a big difference in that. I don't like or love her or anything... I'm just *attracted* to her. That's all there is to it.” Ron explained, running another hand through his messy hair.

Seamus grinned again, taking out a small bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans out of his pocket and popping one into his mouth, offering one to Ron, who took one reluctantly, gingerly tasting it.

“Well, then, ask her out mate.” Seamus urged, nodding enthusiastically. Ron looked at him in shock. “Excuse me?” He demanded, his eyes widening like saucers.

Seamus looked at him in annoyance, making a tutting noise similar to the noise Hermione makes when she's annoyed.

“Who cares if you don't love the girl? It's not about love anyway and I'm sure AJ, being a Slytherin, thinks the same way. I mean, her twin brother is Harry 'playboy' Potter, for Merlin's sake! I doubt she cares about love in a relationship anyway!” He explained carefully.

Ron raised an eyebrow at him, looking confused. “What do you mean, Seamus?” He asked in keen interest.

“Well, wouldn’t it be really wicked to have such a gorgeous girl like AJ Potter as your girlfriend? Think about it, mate! She’s attracted to you, you’re attracted to her, it’s perfect! You two would make a perfect couple and think of what it would do to your reputation to say that you were dating the hottest girl in the year!” Seamus said.

Ron laughed, shaking his head as he looked at his best friend as though he was crazy. “Seamus, my reputation is just fine, thank you! And besides, *girlfriend?* We’re not exactly compatible...” He pointed out.

Seamus looked annoyed, popping another bean into his mouth before he continued on, frantically gesticulating with his hands.

“Ron, she would be the *perfect* girlfriend! Smart, popular, you name it. You could get the right to call her ‘*yours*’! It’s perfect! She’d be a prize! Maybe you dating her will keep Malfoy and Potter from tormenting us Gryffindors from now on!” Seamus realized.

Ron looked thoughtful for a minute, his eyes clouding over in thought as he processed what Seamus had just said. “Hmm... You really think Potter and Malfoy will quit being arrogant, no good pricks to us if I start dating Potter’s sister?” He asked.

Seamus nodded, smiling at him. “Course he will mate, do you think he’d still pick on you if he knew you were his twin’s boyfriend?” He pointed out, laughing.

Ron laughed along, still looking a bit thoughtful. “But, don’t you think he’ll beat me up some more if he finds out I’m dating his one and only sister?” He countered, wrinkling his forehead at the other boy.

Seamus’ eyes widened in realization for a minute before he shook his head and shrugged it off, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t think so mate... I’m thinking AJ will talk to him about stopping if she starts dating *you*. Think about it, Ronnie-boy, how many guys can say they have *AJ Potter* eating out of the palm of their hands? What more could you ask for? This is the type of girl a guy should go for! She’s everything you could ever want.” He raved.



“But, Seamus... Are you sure this would be good, I mean, as far as I know, all I feel for her is a strong attraction... Is that enough to be selfish enough to get her involved in a relationship already?” Ron asked.

Seamus looked at him intently, a serious, solemn look in the other boy's eye as he examined the redhead in front of him carefully.

“Her looks are definitely not absolutely detestable right?” He asked directly.

“Yes...”

“And do you agree with me that you hooking up with her can do a lot for the two of you?” Seamus asked again, giving him a lopsided grin.

“I... Yes, I suppose so.” Ron answered.

Seamus' face broke out into a wide smile, as he began patting Ron on the back in encouragement.

“Then go for her, mate! You don't have to totally *adore* and *worship* a girl to get her as your own! This isn't Shakespeare or anything! Couples get together for different things now! Who knows? She'd be your lucky break! One day, when you both get married, then maybe—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Seamus! Slow down!” Ron interrupted, laughing as he held his hand up to stop his best friend from going on, shaking his head

“Marriage? I still have to worry about asking her out or something like that... Besides, if ever I'm going to start courting her, we'd both have to keep it secret from everyone else for now...” Ron explained, biting his lip.

Seamus nodded, grinning at him. “No problem, I won't tell anyone. How are you planning to meet up with her again anyway?” He asked curiously.

Ron shrugged, waving the concern away. "I'm not so sure at the moment.... Besides, I don't think she *completely* repulses me or anything..." He said, sighing.

Before Seamus could say anything else, Parvati and Lavender had gasped out loud, along with the other Gryffindors in the common room, causing Ron and Seamus to whip their heads towards the direction they were looking at, only to join in the gaping.

Hermione had just walked out of the girls dorms carrying her usual workload of thick books and parchments in her arms as she headed over to where Ron and Seamus were sitting to do her other assignments.

A beautiful, bright smile was on her face, looking like she was glowing, giving her a wonderful, beautiful aura around her which seemed to attract everyone else's attention to her.

Her eyes were sparkling with warmth and vivacity and she was whistling a graceful melody, not noticing the gaping, shocked stares everyone else in the room was giving her.

*"I saw you smiling at me... Was it real or just my fantasy?"* She sang melodiously under her breath, her smile growing wider and her eyes sparkling with an unreadable expression, glowing with radiance.

Sitting down next to Ron, she turned to him and flashed him and Seamus another grin before turning to her books which she had spread out in the table in front of them, still whistling, the smile never leaving her face.

"Good morning you two! What's the matter with you? You look as though you've seen a ghost! Hoping to catch any flies?" She teased, laughing at her own bad pun as she turned back to her homework, still not noticing the silent stares in the room.

"Oh... my... god..." Parvati said out loud slowly, speaking for everyone else in the room as her eyes were wide with shock and her jaw was hanging open.

She slowly stood up from where she sat, shakily and very slowly taking cautious steps towards Hermione, who was looking up at her in confusion and suspicion at the same time, her eyes narrowed.

“Is something wrong, Parvati?” Hermione asked, finally noticing the stares everyone else in the room was giving her as she glanced around, seeing the pale, gaping faces of the girls and the disbelieving, almost *dreamy* expressions of the boys.

“Is something wrong, *everyone*?” Hermione repeated sarcastically as she couldn’t help but smile in amusement at the glances everyone was giving her. She didn’t know what could possibly be wrong... There was nothing different about her except...

“Hermione Granger... What *have* you done to your hair?” Parvati asked again, her voice dripping with resentment and spitefulness and her eyes narrowing in suspicion and jealousy.

Everyone started murmuring in agreement, speaking up and Hermione nervously patted her now straight, silky brown hair, which she had let loose and was dangling just below her shoulders.

“Y-you don’t like it? Does it look that bad? I wasn’t so sure about it...” She asked timidly, looking at Ron and Seamus nervously in question but her two best friends were still speechless, repeatedly opening and closing their jaws in astonishment and admiration.

“You look *ridiculous*; you should change it back *immediately*.” Parvati snapped, gingerly examining a delicate strand of Hermione’s hair with two fingers in disgust before she flicked it back and tossed her own hair over her shoulder haughtily.

“No, don’t, Hermione, I think it looks really good on you.” Neville spoke up, giving her a timid smile.

“No it does not! She looks—”

“*Drop dead gorgeous!* Mione, who’s the lucky guy?!” Fred Weasley exclaimed teasingly, interrupting an irate Parvati, making Hermione blush in embarrassment and flattery at the same time.

“Guy? N-no one, Fred... I just saw this hair straightening spell in one of my books one day and decided to try it on... No big deal really...” Hermione reasoned, laughing when Fred and George both pretended to walk over to her to check her out.

“Oh yeah? Then why do you have that *glowing* look about you today Hermione? You’re a *hot babe*! You mean to tell me you transformed into a hot, sexy babe overnight? You look like you’re floating on air! Like your flying without wings, you look like you’re—”

“In *love*.” Parvati finished for George flatly, crossing her arms over her chest and raising an eyebrow haughtily at the other girl sitting in front of her, her eyes narrowing in suspicion as she took in Hermione’s outfit.

Hermione’s blush was a deep red now as the boys, except for Ron and Seamus, all burst out into catcalls, whistling and demanding to know who it was. “It’s nothing, you guys! I haven’t been seeing anybody!” She protested, shaking her head as they all merely raised their eyebrows in response.

“Yeah, Hermione would have told us if she was seeing anybody and so far, she hasn’t informed us of any guy she’s been interested in so she *must* be telling the truth.” Ron pointed out, finally finding his voice again.

“Hermione! How could you keep something this big from us?! We’re your best friends, we should know about this! What are you doing?!” Seamus demanded in mild anger, his eyes wide in shock.

“I’m not hiding anything! I swear, I have no idea what you guys are all talking about!” Hermione protested, raising her hands up in defense, eyes wide and jaw hanging open.

Lavender walked over to where they were and pulled Hermione up, circling around her to inspect her appearance and outfit as Hermione stiffened nervously, expecting the worst to come out of Lavender’s mouth.

“Hmm... I can see a lot of changes Hermione... First, it was the teeth, which everyone else failed to notice, but not me of course, I notice

*everything*. Then, the hair... Which, I hate to admit, really makes you look much more attractive than before—”

“She’s *not* attractive! She—”

“Parvati! Don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking!” Lavender snapped, narrowing her eyes at her best friend for a moment before she turned back to Hermione, who was now narrowing her eyes at Lavender, not liking the smug smile on the other girls’ lips.

“Anyway, as I was saying, you *do* look very beautiful Hermione, even *I* have to admit that and no offense and all but it’s just that I never could have known that underneath... what you were before, *this* could emerge... And the outfit... Hmm...” Lavender inspected her clothes closely.

Since it was a Sunday morning, Hermione had decided not to wear robes that day and instead, normal muggle clothing- tight black jeans and a light pink shirt which she had topped off with the sweater Harry had given her.

She didn’t know why but whenever she wore his sweater and caught a whiff of his enticing scent on the soft fabric, it gave her a calm feeling of tranquility and warmth, soothing her nerves completely.

Ever since their wonderful, *magical* date last night, she had not taken the sweater off once... Even when she went to bed... *Well... Except when I took a shower...* She thought, chuckling.

Hermione was brought out of her reverie when Parvati and Lavender both gasped at the same time, eyeing the sweater Hermione wore over her shirt.

“If my instincts are correct, that sweater you are wearing is a *male* sweater, Hermione! Now out with it, *whose* is it?” Lavender demanded, her eyes sparkling with curiosity and excitement.

Hermione felt a strong surge of annoyance now as she yanked her arm free from Lavender’s grasp, rolling her eyes. “I don’t have to tell *you*, anything Lavender, now will you all just butt out and let me do my homework in peace?” She snapped.

“Aha! So it *is* a male sweater! Whose is it, Hermione? Huh? Who’s the guy? Everyone around here *knows* that when a guy gives a girl his sweater, jacket or whatever, he’s *interested* in her.” Lavender said smugly, smirking.

Hermione was beet red now as she attempted to read a page in her Transfigurations book, trying in vain to ignore the nosy stares and questions her other housemates were throwing at her.

“Who would actually be interested in an unattractive, unpopular, muggle-born geek like her?” Parvati said out loud in disgust, narrowing her eyes again at Hermione in obvious jealousy now, scowling as she noticed that the boys in the room were now staring at Hermione and *not* her.

*‘I’m’ supposed to be the most beautiful girl in Gryffindor house! Not that book-obsessed geek!! No one even paid attention to ‘her’ before! They all like ‘me’!* She thought angrily, scowling again when the boys all cheered out loud once more, answering her question.

“I would!” A Gryffindor boy called out, grinning as Hermione flushed again and Parvati let out a growl, her face twisting in an ugly snarl. “Me too!” Another boy agreed, slapping the first boy who had yelled out a high five in agreement, laughing.

Parvati tried to regain her composure, giving Hermione a smug, self-satisfied look, flipping her lustrous hair over her shoulder in a haughty manner.

“Well... Obviously, you’re trying to be me, Hermione but it ain’t working... *I’m* still the most beautiful Gryffindor girl here... or perhaps, even the most beautiful girl in the school. You’re wasting your time.” She said but everyone ignored her, still focused on Hermione.

“Hermione! How could you *not* tell us?! We’re your closest friends!” Seamus argued, glaring indignantly at Hermione, which she returned by rolling her eyes, sighing in exasperation.

“Look you all, I am *not* dating anyone, okay?! Just drop—”

"I was in the common room last night and I saw her walking in *very* late... Or should I say, *morning*? She looked gorgeous too, all dressed up and glowing like a blushing bride! Obviously the '*I-just-had-a-wonderful-date-with-a-wonderful-guy*' look." Ginny quipped up from where she sat, giving Hermione a wicked smile.

"You saw me?!" Hermione asked in shock.

Ginny giggled, shaking her head hastily. "No, I was just kidding but I bet I *could* have! Hermione, just tell us, *who* is this guy you're seeing?" She demanded.

Hermione looked at all of them in eye closely, giving them all a stern look that would have made Prof. McGonagall quiver as she began to speak again in a firm, confident voice.

"I was *not* seeing anyone last night. I was just up in my room, studying as I always do and this sweater is just a gift from a friend. I am merely smiling because I got a good night's rest and I straightened my hair because I just wanted a new look. That's all there is to it." She said firmly, making it sound like the conversation was over.

Then, smiling, she turned to Ron and Seamus, who were both still shocked at the accusations that had been thrown at her.

"How about a break from all the studying, you two? I'm starving, let's go to the great hall and have our lunch." She offered, standing up and gathering all her books back into her arms as Ron and Seamus both nodded and followed wordlessly, still slightly pale.

Just as Hermione passed Parvati, the other girl's eyes had widened in realization as she caught a slight whiff of a familiar scent on Hermione's new green, strangely familiar sweater, causing her to narrow her eyes dangerously and here face to twist in rage.

"Yup. I *definitely* think she's seeing someone." Lavender said out loud once again, making everyone laugh out loud before they all continued on with their assignments, still amused by what had happened.

Parvati barely heard her, her hands clenching into tight fists and her form absolutely seething with intense anger as she fought to keep from screaming out loud.

*That scent... That strangely, familiar, absolutely sexy scent...* She thought angrily, her form shaking now as blood began to ooze from her clenched fist from where her long, perfectly-manicured nails were cutting deep into the flesh of her palm.

*No wonder that sweater had looked so familiar... That sweater is Harry's! MY Harry's!!* She thought in a furious fit of rage, seeing nothing but red around her.

She knew it.... The moment she had laid eyes on that beautiful, new sweater Hermione was wearing, she knew she had seen it before... After all... How many students could possibly have a sweater like that? Only Harry... Only her handsome, rich, popular, absolutely *perfect* Harry...

*And that little muggle-born witch Hermione had to go and take it from him.... Or rather had to go and take 'him' from 'me'!* Parvati raged silently, ignoring the weird stares everyone was giving her.

She knew that Hermione was interested in her Harry all along... *That's* why she had even tried to talk Parvati out of their relationship back when they were still dating and *that's* why Hermione was always giving Harry these strange looks...

*All this time I thought she was concerned... I thought she was my friend and I thought she was harmless enough not to be a threat; she was planning a way to get my man!* Parvati realized indignantly, glaring at the floor.

*She's even charmed him enough for him to give her his sweater! He's never given 'me' any of his stuff... Or any other girl for that matter! Hermione was scum the whole time... She's in love with MY Harry!* Parvati thought to herself, inwardly fuming.

*Well she can't have him... No matter what it takes, I 'will' take back what is mine and that is Harry...* Parvati promised to herself, a sinister look forming on her features.



*If she thinks she's won, she's got another thing coming... She may have that sweater to rub in my face but she can keep it for all I care because I will have Harry...* She thought smugly and as she was just about to walk back up to her room, she heard a couple of Gryffindor lower years whispering to each other.

Curious, she listened closely as one pouty first year girl mentioned Hermione's name in a loud whisper.

"That Hermione Granger is so annoying! She thinks she owns the world or something just because she's the highest witch in the year all the time! She doesn't deserve to have such a guy like Viktor Krum to be interested in her!"

"Oh, I agree! I mean, he's always following her around like such a lovesick puppy dog that he doesn't even see any of *us*, his devoted fans, at his feet! He's too busy drooling over *her*! I mean, is she *that* pretty to have *Viktor Krum*, of all guys, to like her?"

"Certainly *not*! Viktor is too hot to be with *her*! The poor guy, he doesn't even know how obvious he is! I mean, he's crazy about her and the poor thing can't seem to do anything about it... Like he's scared or something... He deserves much better!"

"She *is* now... Next thing you know, *Harry Potter* will be falling all over himself for her!"

"Oh definitely *not*! Harry and Draco are *the* hottest bachelors in school! Harry wouldn't be interested in her and even if he was, it wouldn't *last*!"

"Yeah, you know he likes to go around different girls! She probably has a better chance with Viktor than she ever would with Harry! Though they're both hot and popular, it's obvious who has the higher standards." One girl quipped up.

"And who's the arrogant jerk!" A girl exclaimed, making them all burst out giggling.

Parvati let an evil smirk cross her lips as she turned and walked slowly back to her dorms after she had heard their conversation, an

evil scheme already going through her head as she pondered on the information she had just received.

“Hmm... Viktor Krum has a thing for Hermione but doesn't seem to have the guts to ask her out eh?” She murmured under her breath to no one in particular, the smile on her lips growing as she entered their dorms and plopped down on her bed, thinking.

“Well Mr. Krum... I believe it's about time you and I had a little chat...” Parvati said out loud, finally allowing a full blown smile on her face as she took out the picture she had of Harry, looking at him dreamily.

“You're mine, Harry. *Mine...*” She said, sighing as she admired Harry's confident smile in the picture as he was clad in his Slytherin Quidditch uniform, bringing out his eyes. Then, smirking again as she put the picture back in her drawer, she casually began examining her fingernails.

“Hermione Granger, you are going down...”

“What the hell are all these bloody mistletoes for?” Blaise asked in annoyance as he and AJ made their way down the corridor towards the owlery.

AJ rolled her eyes, obviously annoyed by her best friend's ignorance. “It's the Yuletide season you idiot. They're putting up mistletoes because we're just about to come into the holidays.” She snapped irritably, rolling her eyes.

Blaise looked at her in surprise for a minute, his features creased into a questioning glance as an eyebrow arched itself up expectantly. “What's wrong with you today? Why are you so cranky?” He demanded in annoyance, rolling his eyes as he walked on.

AJ let out a breath of frustration as she grabbed Blaise by the arm and moved him away from the direction of the mistletoe he was heading for, making sure he didn't walk under it.

“What the hell was that for?” Blaise demanded, looking at her in confusion.

AJ gritted her teeth as she kept on walking, intent on getting to the owlery before Blaise could irritate her enough for her to blow off at him.

*“Because, Zabini, in case your brain may have forgotten—walk under a magical mistletoe with a member of the opposite sex and you get trapped under it with a magical barrier until you kiss the person you’re with and I most certainly do not want to kiss you.”* She snapped.

Blaise laughed and made an indignant face, pretending to look hurt. “Hey! I happen to be a very good kisser, you know! Ask my past girlfriends! I—”

“I get the picture. I just don’t want to have any more *kisses* right now...I think I’ve had enough last night...” AJ mumbled under her breath before she could prevent herself, causing Blaise’s eyes to widen in surprise as she slapped her own hand over her mouth.

*Way to go, Potter...* A voice inside her head spoke up sarcastically but she ignored it, cursing out loud as Blaise began to prod her for information.

“You *did*?! Why didn’t you tell me? What happened?! Who did you kiss?!” He demanded, looking at her with a smirk on his face just as a first year Hufflepuff student passed by them, throwing them both a look as he heard Blaise’s last sentence.

AJ glared at the student in threat, narrowing her eyes dangerously.

“You got a bloody problem, junior?!” She snapped at the passing boy, sneering as the boy gulped and sped up nervously.

Blaise just smirked and stuck a foot out, causing the poor boy to trip immediately, sending him and his pile of library books flying all over the floor as Blaise burst out into loud, boisterous laughter, echoing through the halls. AJ rolled her eyes again at his childishness and stalked off, leaving Blaise hurrying after her, grabbing her arm to stop her as he spun her around to face him again.

“Whoa... That was the first time you snapped at a younger student just for looking at you! You’re usually the levelheaded Potter twin...

What's up AJ?" He asked directly, looking at her with a pointed look on his face.

AJ sighed again, running a hand through her long raven hair as she leaned against the corridor wall, closing her eyes momentarily.

"Well... Do you remember... The other night... At the Slytherin celebration party... When we all got drunk?" She started, looking at the floor in an attempt to hide the blush coming onto her features.

Blaise smirked, crossing his arms arrogantly over his chest as he leaned against the opposite wall with a smug look on his face.

"Of course I do, that's the night I laid this good-looking Slytherin third year, forgot her name though but anyway—"

"Too much information, Blaise." AJ interrupted flatly, rubbing her forehead to relieve herself of the headache that had suddenly overcome her.

"I was just kidding!" He exclaimed, laughing at her sickened expression as he nodded for her to continue.

"Anyway... I... See, I went out of the common room right? I took a stroll around the corridors though I know that was a pretty stupid move to do since I was drunk but... As I said, I suddenly found myself in Gryffindor territory and somehow, I met up with—" AJ didn't get to continue when they both heard footsteps down the corridor.

Looking up, she saw the face of the person whose name she had just been about to say out loud, immediately feeling the blood rushing to her pale cheeks.

"Ron Weasley." She said coldly, sneering snobbishly at the other boy as he, Seamus and Hermione were passing by them in the corridor, obviously headed for the library.

"Potter." He returned, a light tinge of pink rushing up to his face as he met the girl face to face, trying not to stare at the currently sneering, cherry lips he had already kissed before.

He glared right back at her, an unreadable expression in his face as AJ saw Seamus nudge him with a smile on his face, making Ron redden and nudge him back in annoyance.

“Seamus Finnegan and Hermione Granger. Such a *pleasure* to meet you three here.” Blaise added sarcastically, mirroring the smirk on AJ’s face as he regarded the trio with a look of disdain.

“Good day to the two of you too. Would you mind getting out of our way, we’re headed somewhere, thanks.” Hermione said, almost cheerfully as she gave the two Slytherins a friendly smile.

AJ blinked slowly, slowly arching an eyebrow as her sneer widened, Blaise sniggering right beside her. “You’re a mudblood, Granger... How good could your day possibly be?” AJ retorted, her crankiness getting the better of her as Blaise sniggered beside her again, covering his mouth with his hand.

“Oh, I see you’ve finally straightened your hair Granger. I must say, it makes you look slightly more *decent* I’d say but you still wouldn’t win any beauty contests, that’s for sure.” AJ added snidely, smirking.

Hermione’s smile faltered into a frown as she looked down for a minute before she clenched her jaw and looked up again, her eyes looking straight ahead. “Potter, Zabini, please move.” She said politely again, not wanting to lose her temper on such a lovely day such as this.

Blaise and AJ both met each other’s amused look before they looked back at the trio, not at all budging from their spot. “What’s this Granger? Your new hairdo gave you some kind of authority or something?” Blaise mocked, laughing as Hermione reddened.

“Hey! She asked you both politely to move, quit being rude, insensitive pricks!” Seamus muttered at them angrily, attempting to lunge for Blaise but Hermione held him back, shaking her head.

AJ’s eyes narrowed suspiciously for a minute as she saw the sweater Hermione was wearing. *If I didn’t know better, I’d say that looks like my brother’s sweater...* She thought in shock, her eyes widening before she laughed inwardly at herself, shrugging it off. *Who am I*

*kidding, there are plenty of green cashmere sweaters here... Granger probably has one too...* She reasoned, shaking her head at her own crazy idea.

“What if we don’t want to move? What are you losers going to do?” Blaise taunted, his eyes glinting as AJ snapped out of her thoughts, blinking.

“We don’t have time for this, I’m asking nicely, *please*, move.” Hermione said softly again, looking crestfallen as she tried to ignore the mocking looks the two Slytherins, particularly the emerald-eyed one, sent her.

“Aw... Are you going to cry now, Granger? That’s so—”

**SMACK!!**

AJ didn’t get to finish as she fell back against Blaise, who deftly caught her, clutching her cheek in pain where Hermione had raised her hand and slapped her roughly, causing a red bruise to start forming on her pale cheek.

“You... You *bitch-slapped* me!! No one has ever slapped me!!” AJ said out loud in disbelief, her eyes widening in anger and indignation.

“Yeah, well, not everyone thinks you’re *delicate*, Potter.” Hermione said calmly, looking as though she wanted to take back what she had done.

“Aw...What’s wrong, Potter? Can’t handle a little pain?..” Seamus cracked, giving Ron a teasing grin when he blushed furiously, scowling to himself.

“Why you little—” AJ growled, struggling violently with Blaise, who was trying to hold her back from trying to lunge at the Gryffindors as her emerald eyes flashed with fury and her face twisted into a vicious snarl.

“Calm down AJ... Don’t let them get to you.” Blaise hissed in her ear, immediately causing AJ to stop struggling and glare silently, thinking of a thousand hexes to throw at the Gryffindors in front of her.

AJ glared at Hermione, her emerald eyes narrowing threateningly at the other girl. "Well, well Granger, looks like your new look has finally given you guts after all... I do believe no one, *no one*, has ever bitch-slapped *me*, before. I had better watch my back... You just be sure to watch yours." She threatened darkly, her eyes glinting in malice.

Hermione sighed as AJ and Blaise both cleared a way for the three Gryffindors, glaring at them darkly as they passed by, AJ still clutching her red cheek, wincing in pain and humiliation.

Just as Ron passed AJ, their eyes met and he secretly slipped something into her hand before he walked ahead, following after his friends hurriedly just as AJ hastily slipped the note into her pocket.

Blaise flicked his wand over AJ's cheek, healing it up slowly and easing the pain away as AJ sighed and pressed her forehead against the wall silently, shaking her head. "That was who I was trying to tell you... *Ron Weasley*...I actually *kissed* him that night I was drunk." AJ continued, making Blaise look at her as though she was crazy.

"You just got bitch-slapped by Hermione Granger of all people and you're still thinking about that loser, Ron?! I don't understand how you can like such a guy anyway." Blaise said derisively as he used his wand to conjure up a cloth with ice, pressing it to AJ's cheek.

AJ winced as the cloth slightly stung her slowly healing cheek, sighing in frustration before she groaned out loud. "Fuck... You're right... That was stupid... I shouldn't have let the mudblood bitch-slap me like that, that was so embarrassing... What was I thinking? I guess I was just too stressed out to fight back..." She said, shrugging.

"Alright, forget about Granger, we'll be sure to get her back later, just tell me what this problem is that you have." Blaise said, gently, looking at her.

AJ sighed, nodding carefully before she leaned against the wall, biting her lip. "Well... I kissed Ron... And...."

"Did he kiss you back?" Blaise asked, raising both his eyebrows, giving her a knowing smile. AJ glared back at him, rolling her eyes. "Yeah, he did." She snapped back hotly.

Blaise gave her a look as though she was nuts, his eyes widening and his eyebrows fusing together. "Well then, what the hell is the problem?" He demanded, hiding a smile.

*"I felt nothing!* It wasn't all *swoon, sigh* and *fireworks* Blaise! It wasn't the way I had dreamed it would be!" She burst out immediately, covering her face with her hands.

Blaise's eyes widened in shock as he stared at her in question. "What do you mean you felt nothing? You didn't enjoy the kiss? He wasn't a good kisser?" He asked again, looking concerned.

"No, it's not that... I *did* enjoy it and he *was* a good kisser... In fact, it felt nice... It's just that... It wasn't as *passionate* and as *intimate* as I imagined it to be...I don't know...I guess I was looking for something more." She explained, sighing dejectedly.

Blaise looked at her with a serious expression, obviously listening closely and letting her talk freely. "So it wasn't up to the standards you had expected it to be?" He concluded.

AJ sighed again but nodded, though hesitantly, shutting her eyes. "Is it stupid of me to expect a kiss to be explosive or something for me to know that that person is *the* one?" She asked.

Blaise didn't answer. "What else happened?" He asked again, a strange suspicion in his eyes. AJ flushed darkly and mumbled something under her breath Blaise couldn't quite make out, causing him to lean in closer and scrunch his face in annoyance.

"What?! I can't hear you!" He snapped.

AJ glared at him, deep red now as her eyes clouded over, wanting nothing more than the ground to open up and swallow her whole. "When I looked into his eyes, I saw...*Draco's* eyes instead of his..." She grumbled again, her words barely understandable but Blaise understood every one, making his eyes widen like saucers.

*"Draco?!"* He yelled out loud, his voice echoing through the corridor making AJ gasp in horror and shove Blaise in retaliation but Blaise didn't seem to mind, too shocked to care.



"Shut up!! You don't have to shout it out to the entire school, Blaise!" She snapped, growling. Blaise opened and closed his jaw, still struck speechless. *Whoa... Looks like Draco's love for AJ is not one-sided after all...* He thought, shaking his head.

"That's not the worst part... I... I snuck up to his room that same night and kissed him... Just hope he thinks it was just a dream or something..." AJ mumbled, shaking her head at herself when Blaise's jaw dropped open again.

"Hey! I needed to know what the bloody hell I was feeling for him ok?! Don't look at me like that! Look, you know what? Just drop it okay! Forget I ever mentioned it..." AJ muttered, attempting to walk off but Blaise grabbed her arm, laughing.

"I was kidding, okay? You're such a cranky bitch." He teased, laughing as they both started to walk off again, heading off towards the Owlery.

AJ secretly took out the note Ron had slipped her out of her pocket, carefully unfolding it as Blaise watched her quietly, waiting for her to finish reading the note. After a couple of minutes, she looked up at him again, her eyes filled with uncertainty and confusion. Blaise raised his eyebrows at her in question, expecting her to tell him what was written on the note.

"It's from Ron... He... He wants me to meet him at the Astronomy tower later... He says he has something important to tell me..." AJ said quietly, sighing.

Blaise looked shocked as he widened his eyes at her, his jaw dropping again. "So are you going to meet him?" He asked, his voice cracking.

AJ looked annoyed, rolling her eyes at him. "Of *course* I am! This is what I have been waiting for, for 3 years! I'm not going to give this chance up, I've waited too long for something like this!" She snapped, though her eyes looked as though they didn't agree with her words.

Blaise turned to give AJ a solemn look, searching her eyes for traces of sincerity. "AJ... Let me ask you something... Do you... Do you feel anything for Draco?" He asked slowly.

AJ didn't answer, looking intently at the floor as though it was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen in her life.

"What did you feel when you kissed him? Did you feel anything?" Blaise asked again, looking at her with an intense expression in his eyes.

AJ surprisingly let out an unreadable sigh of longing, turning to face him with a strange sparkle in her eyes.

"Oh... It was... It was *unbelievable*...I have never experienced anything like it in my life, I—Oh, I just... His arms around me, his lips caressing mine, running my fingers through his hair... I... I felt as though I was going to melt in his arms... It was passionate and intense and confusing all at the same time... I felt as though I was going to spontaneously combust!" She burst out, breathing heavily and turning deep red.

Blaise didn't say anything as he just nodded and gave her a long, hard stare. "So in short, you enjoyed the kiss very much?" He asked, flashing a wry smile. AJ sighed and shrugged, looking frustrated as she ran a hand through her hair in thought, disheveling it slightly.

"Yes, I—I don't know... I can't understand it because I can't be completely sure if the kiss was fueled by actual... actual *love* or *affection* or just plain *lust*...Oh, but it was wonderful, Blaise... Draco... He kissed me as though nothing else mattered except the two of us at that very moment...It made me feel something I couldn't understand...Something I *didn't want* to understand." She continued breathlessly.

Blaise looked at her as she continued, listening intently to the words that were rushing out of her mouth.

"It was so wonderful... There were butterflies in my stomach and everywhere he touched me, my skin just *tingled*... I...It was like I *wanted* him to touch me...To have his hands all over me... I've never

felt more complete before in my life... He just... He made me feel so.. So *alive*..." She said, her voice sounding wistful and dreamy.

*Oh Merlin... She has it bad...If only she wasn't the densest person in the world...* Blaise thought in both amusement and frustration, shaking his head to himself.

"And suddenly I felt as though I just wanted to stay there with them and forget about everything else... Nothing else mattered at that very moment except for him...Being with him... It was *magical*..." She continued softly, her voice barely audible.

Neither of them spoke for a long time after that, AJ just walking while staring at the floor and Blaise just processing what she had just told him, waiting for her in case she had anything else to say.

"It was probably just my imagination... I mean, you know me Blaise, I've had the biggest crush on Ron for the last three years and I've always imagined that I would feel this way about *him* because he's the guy that's *supposed* to be with me but... What is this? Draco's been nothing but an insensitive jerk to me for three years...Why...Why *now*?" She asked, obviously not expecting an answer.

Blaise opened his mouth to respond anyway but AJ continued, not giving him a chance to speak up.

"I like *Ron*, I really do... Or at least, I *think* I do...No! That's not what I meant, I— Wouldn't you agree that it would be safer to go for someone whom I've liked for three years now than to go for someone who I just started liking and just so happens to be my brother's best friend? Someone who seems to delight in annoying the hell out of me all the time?" She reasoned, looking helpless.

Once again, Blaise opened his mouth to answer but AJ ranted on, caught up in the moment to notice her best friend still there with her, rolling his eyes in frustration.

"I've always imagined that in the future, I would still like Ron and nothing would change that... I just can't accept such a sudden, *abrupt* change of heart right now... I've always thought it would be Ron and

just the thought of finding out it's someone else is... I don't know... Besides, I'm thinking Ron is the *right* person to go for right? Right, you agree don't you? Did I make any sense?" AJ asked helplessly, giving Blaise a desperate look for an answer.

After a long moment of silence, Blaise stopped them both and looked intently at his best friend, giving her a smile. "Hey... You know the best advice I can give you right now?" He asked, raising his eyebrows.

AJ shook her head, fusing her eyebrows together in question. "What?"

Blaise shrugged and gave her a wry smile, casually raising an eyebrow.

"Find out which one *wants* to be with you and which one just *wants* you... Stop trying to think you should follow what your head says and choose this time to follow your instincts... Choose who you *want* to be with... Follow your heart." He said simply, winking before walking off ahead of her, letting her think of what he had just said.

*What the bloody hell is that supposed to mean??* She asked herself in frustration.

"Follow your *heart*? What is that supposed to mean and where the fuck did you get that?! Suddenly you're an expert now or something? Or did you just suddenly become a romantic? Blaise? Blaise!" She called after him.

AJ stood there, stunned for a moment, her best friend's words echoing through her mind before she shook her head and ran after him, opening her mouth to ask him something else.

"Hey! Wait for me!"

"What the fuck is wrong with you today Harry?" Draco asked, narrowing his eyes at his best friend in irritation as Harry sent Hedwig off with his letter to Sirius about his victory, turning back to Draco with a grin on his face.

"I should be asking *you* that, you look like shit, Malfoy." He retorted as he took in Draco disheveled hair and dark circles under his eyes, sniggering when Draco growled at him, his eyes glinting maliciously.

"Well, *you* look as though you've gotten the best lay in your life... What's wrong with you Potter? Your date with the mudblood go well? Finally laid her?" He asked, his eyes peering at Harry curiously.

Harry's smile faltered for a minute and his eyes dropped guiltily for a split second before he looked up again, masking his face with a fake, self-satisfied smirk.

"Not yet but it's coming along well, Malfoy... I-I'll... I'll get her soon; you just prepare to lose our bet." Harry said tonelessly, not meeting Draco's eyes as he reached out to stroke AJ's eagle owl.

Draco laughed, extending a hand out to Ferio himself in acknowledgement. The owl perched himself onto him, giving Draco an affectionate nip on the finger.

"Well, fine Potter, I'll never doubt your seduction skills again. I'm not making any more bets with you about stuff like this..." Draco said wryly, not seeing Harry's eyes cloud over in remorse and sadness for a brief minute before he masked them again, turning to face Draco again.

"How was the date anyway? Did you make any moves on her?" Draco asked, his eyes twinkling in curiosity as he stared at him expectantly.

Harry forced a laugh out, annoyed and frustrated as he felt his chest squeeze painfully, cursing himself for a minute before he forced the feeling away, more than willing to ignore the feeling completely.

*I will not let myself be weak... I will not let these developing feelings for Hermione overcome me... I'm Harry Potter, I will not cave in...I can handle this...* Harry said to himself, narrowing his eyes before he looked at his best friend, nodding.

"The date was perfect of course, provided I'm *me*. And yeah, I *did* put moves on her but I'm going with a different approach... Trying to earn

her trust first..." Harry lied, wanting nothing more than to grab his words and stuff them right back in his mouth.

*Hope he doesn't find out that throughout the whole date... I never thought of sleeping with her once...In fact, I haven't thought about it for a long time...*He thought helplessly, holding back a groan.

Fortunately, Draco looked convinced, nodding. "I see... Did her sudden *appearance* have anything to do with you, Potter? She actually looks half-decent now when I saw her in the corridors." He said, smirking.

Harry was just barely able to prevent himself from punching his best friend right in the face, grimacing as he let out a breath of frustration, running a hand through his air.

"I... How the hell should I know? She... She was that beau—I mean, she looked like that last night..." He answered, shrugging as he headed out, Draco following after him in a much more relaxed pace.

"Well, maybe you won't have such a hard time bedding her now that she's attractive enough." Draco reasoned, shrugging as they both headed back to the Slytherin dungeons, passing by a couple of giggly third years who gave them doe-eyed looks, all blushing.

"Erm... Yeah, maybe..." Harry mumbled, not being able to muster up enough words to answer back properly.

Draco was just about to ask what was wrong with him when they saw Blaise and AJ running towards them in the corridor, making him stop abruptly and try to hide the growing blush rising in his cheeks as he spotted AJ.

Ever since that dream he had about her, he couldn't get her out of his head, thinking about her all the time and wishing a thousand times that it hadn't been a dream and that AJ had really kissed him herself.

He had been thinking about the whole thing the whole day, trying to determine whether or not it was really a dream or not but he had finally assumed that it was when AJ had acted as though nothing had

changed, not at all mentioning anything about a kiss or sneaking into his bed.

Draco had been frustrated with himself these past encounters, to say the least, as he noticed that now, whenever AJ was near, he had begun losing all his Malfoy charm and just buckled under pressure, not being able to carry on with the seduction plan he had been planning to do with her.

It was absolutely absurd since Draco was always so calm and cool with girls. He was usually the one having the advantage as the girls fell all over themselves just to impress him or to please him. Now...

He was nauseating himself... He had to get his act together if he ever expected AJ to love him back... He was *Draco Malfoy*, for Merlin's sake! Slytherin bad boy, one of the hottest and most wanted guys in school! He shouldn't be acting like this...

He shouldn't be feeling nervous... He hated to think how Harry, how *everyone* else would react when they saw him falling all over himself for a girl, even if the girl was AJ Potter herself...

He had been absolutely *livid* when he had seen Weasley touching AJ that same night... Just looking at where his filthy hands were touching *his* girl made him want to rush over to the Gryffindor and beat the hell out of him, showing him exactly who AJ belonged to...

He knew it was probably innocent.... He didn't really expect Weasley to ever think he could have a chance with AJ but still, he didn't like the way the redheaded Gryffindor had carried AJ back... He didn't like the idea that he had touched her...

He couldn't possibly actually think AJ would like *him*... Draco knew exactly how other guys were like... He knew that a lot of guys fancied AJ themselves but he knew that it was only because they liked the way she looked...

Draco, surprisingly—even to himself, liked her for much more than that... He knew it was hard to believe considering the fact that his reputation but still... He actually *knew* AJ for who she was and that was what he loved about her... *Who she was*...

Sure, he had to admit, he *did* like the way she looked, she was a very beautiful girl but it went much deeper than that.... Her innocence, her vulnerability, her determination and her intelligence... Her strength... Even her weaknesses...

The way she wasn't afraid to show her emotions to others... The way that in just being herself, Amanda Jane Potter, she seemed to be the most beautiful, the most pure and untainted creature he had ever seen...

He didn't enjoy being the jerk he was to the other girls he was with before to AJ... He never wanted to treat her that cruelly and that insensitively... But one thing was for sure, he would *never* disrespect her like the others... She was too delicate to be treated and dirtied in such a filthy way as that... She was the *only* soft spot he actually had in that sense...

He knew the thought itself was immensely laughable... Him, *Draco Malfoy*, actually becoming so sensitive when it came to a *girl*... And AJ Potter nonetheless! The former skinny brat whom he used to have fist fights and wrestling matches with back in their first year was now the girl who made his heart stop just by the simplest smile. However, he knew that he would *never* respect or be gentle with any other girl, or guy for that matter besides her... He was still the same to everyone else...

That was the thing, somehow, he knew that AJ would *never* expect him to change for her... She would respect him for being exactly who he was, jerk or not, because like it or not, Draco liked the way he was right now... Even if it did mean occasional squabbles with her because of it every now and then.

He wasn't the type would be all sweet and friendly and happy-go-lucky to everyone all of a sudden just because he was in love... The thought of being that sappy and... *nice* disgusted him...he still loved being his plain, dark, cold self-centered self and he knew that AJ was the type of girl who would be able to accept that and still love him for who he was...

He hated to see guys who became all mushy and sweet and all smiles because their girlfriends were pathetic goody-goodies who



influenced them... It was absolutely *nauseating*...He was lucky he and AJ were so alike...

He loved every single thing about her... He wanted to be there for her, to protect her, to love and be loved by her in return... He actually saw more to her than just another girl he could bed like the other girls in the past...

He wanted much more than just AJ's trust and friendship, more than just her admiration, her commitment or her desire and more than just *her*... He wanted her *love*... It was something he had come to realize after three years with her...

That was why he was *not* about to let AJ fall into the hands of someone like Weasley... She deserved much more than that... She deserved someone who *loved* her... That's what she needs... She deserves *me*...She *needs* me...

*I don't know what he's planning but Ron Weasley is not going to get his hands on what is going to be mine... I can't believe he even thinks that a Gryffindor filthy scum like him is even worthy of AJ...He has another thing coming...*Draco thought darkly, his hands slowly closing into fists.

Snapping out of his dreamy thoughts, Draco looked up just as AJ and Blaise reached them, Blaise flashing Draco a knowing, teasing smile and AJ looking flustered as she hastily tried to avoid his eyes, looking down at the floor.

Harry immediately slung an arm around his twin and gave Blaise a smirk, raising an eyebrow. "Trip any Hufflepuffs lately, Zabini?" He asked, chuckling in amusement.

Blaise laughed and shrugged casually, lightly punching Harry on the shoulder. "Just three for today, Potter. What have you and Malfoy here been doing?" He asked, casually throwing a smirk at Draco, who was scowling and muttering to himself.

Draco just flashed him a sneer, narrowing his eyes into slits. "Sod off Zabini, I am *not* in the mood." He said coldly, his eyes flashing like lightning bolts.

Harry and Blaise exchanged taunting smirks while AJ looked at Draco intently, studying his features. "Malfoy, are you okay? You look like you didn't get enough sleep...Makes you look uglier than usual." She commented jokingly, looking at him.

Draco nodded, desperately controlling the urge to pounce on the beautiful girl and kiss her until there was no tomorrow, clenching his hands into tight fists. "Yeah, I'm fine AJ, sod off. I just don't get enough sleep nowadays... You know, strange dreams..." He said, giving her a wry smile.

AJ's eyes widened considerably and a light blush slightly rose up to her cheeks, before she coughed and turned away.

Draco's eyes narrowed in suspicion. He was about to ask her what was wrong when Blaise suddenly stopped them all in front of another corridor, giving them a grin. "Well, I'll catch up with you guys later, I have to meet a special someone." He said, winking before he walked off, his robes swishing behind him.

Harry looked after him for a moment, his eyes narrowed slightly in mild suspicion and disbelief. *Was it my imagination or was he heading for Hufflepuff territory??* He thought, fusing his eyebrows together.

After a moment, he shrugged it off, smirking at himself. *Nah... Blaise liking a Hufflepuff is almost as insane as me liking a Gryffindor...* He thought for a minute before his eyes widened in realization as he processed what he had thought.

*I mean... Me actually falling in love with—I mean—Ah, damn! Forget it!* He yelled at himself angrily, clenching his hands into tight fists as he tried to force the annoying voice of his immensely unused conscience away in his head.

"Hey, AJ, didn't you say you knew where the kitchen was?" Harry asked suddenly, looking at his twin as the three of them walked on silently, trying to draw his mind away from his thoughts.

AJ raised an eyebrow at him, nodding. "Yeah.... Why?" She asked back in confusion.

Harry just gave her a lopsided grin, shrugging sheepishly. “Well, let’s go and pay it a visit, I could use with a snack right now.” He said, laughing at AJ’s annoyed expression.

“I swear, don’t you ever get sick of stuffing that ugly face of yours?” AJ asked him, narrowing her eyes as she began to lead them down another corridor towards the kitchen, shaking her head at her brother.

Draco managed to roll his eyes, giving AJ a smile in response. “Let’s just say he’s been like this the whole day. Probably got himself a good lay last night or something.” He explained, relieved that he was finally speaking in a confident voice again.

“I did *not* need to know that...” AJ muttered as the two boys laughed, smirking at her just as they rounded the corner. AJ opened her mouth to say something else but before she had the chance, her foot accidentally slipped, causing her to fall forward and lose her balance.

“Yikes!” She yelped but before she could hit the floor, she felt two strong arms circle around her waist and steady her, pulling her back up into a standing position meeting Draco’s eyes, their faces mere inches apart.

“I—T-thanks—Malfoy—I” AJ stammered, her eyes widening as she stared into Draco’s silver eyes, the same eyes she had seen when she had been kissing Ron... Instinctively, she shivered.

Harry had stopped abruptly and was glaring at his best friend in such a way that would have made Voldemort cower, his hands clenching themselves into tight, angry fists.

“No problem...*Potter*...” Draco responded softly, ignoring Harry as his eyes focused themselves on the girl’s lips, the silver orbs clouding over in want and desire as he prevented himself from pressing his own lips onto those tempting ones.

AJ stared right back at him silently, feeling once again, the feeling of butterflies in her stomach and her skin starting to tingle where Draco’s arms were touching her, causing her to gasp in surprise and horror and pull back immediately, her eyes wide.

*What are you doing acting like a complete fool?!* AJ cursed herself, stepping back quickly away from the blonde as though nothing had happened and hastily fixing herself in an effort to avoid Draco's eyes.

Harry grabbed a fistful of Draco's collar from behind and yanked him farther away from his sister, giving him a death glare as Draco managed to give him a weak, sheepish smile.

"I—Anyway, let's go, the kitchen is right over there behind the painting of the bowl of fruits." She said hastily, slightly shaking as she walked over to the giant painting of the bowl of fruit and gingerly tickled the pear, causing it to turn into a handle.

AJ pulled the handle, opening the door and pushing Harry and Draco inside an enormous room with a high ceiling, exactly as large as the Great Hall right above it with pots and pans of brass hanging all over the place.

Harry and Draco both looked around the room casually but before neither of them could say anything, a small, squealing blur bolted towards them, knocking Harry over to the floor as the blur hugged him tightly, winding him.

"*Oomph!!* Dobby?!" He asked in surprise, desperately trying to wrestle the excited elf away from him as Draco looked at Dobby in shock and recognition, his eyes wide with surprise.

"It *is* Dobby, sir! It is! Dobby has been hoping to see you again Harry Potter *sir* and now Harry Potter has come to see him!" Dobby squealed in his high elf voice, grinning up at Harry, who grimaced back and finally peeled the house-elf off him, raising an eyebrow.

"Sorry Dobby but we didn't actually come to see you, see we—"

"Master Draco, sir! So good to see you again too sir!! Dobby is missing you sir! Dobby is missing you very much! He is very happy that he and Harry Potter are best friends!" Dobby squeaked, rushing to Draco this time and hugging him tightly as he had Harry, causing Draco to stumble onto the floor in surprise.

AJ couldn't help giggling at both boys now sprawled on the floor, finding the situation amusing as Draco peeled Dobby off of him as well. He winced as he picked himself up from the floor and offered a hand to help Harry.

"Er... Nice to see you too Dobby. I... Uh... like your *get-up*..." Draco said, smirking at Dobby's clothing. Back when Dobby had been serving the Malfoys, he hadn't worn any real clothing but now that he had been freed, he was wearing a rather odd outfit.

He wore a tea cozy for a hat which had bright badges pinned right to it, a weird neck-tie with a pattern of horse shoes and to what it looked like, soccer shorts... his socks were mismatched, one being the black one Harry had used to free him and one having pink and orange stripes.

"Dobby, what are you doing here?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow as he promptly looked around, narrowing his eyes threateningly at the elves that peered at him in avid interest.

"Dobby has come to work here sir! Winky is here too! Professor Dumbledore gave me and Winky jobs!" He squealed proudly, hugging Harry again.

Harry stiffened, lightly pushing the excited elf away. "Hey, watch it Dobby..." He warned lightly, straightening his robes.

"Winky's that elf whose been accused of using Harry's wand at the Quidditch world cup isn't she?" AJ recalled, looking thoughtful and suspicious at the same time.

"Yeah, she is... What the bloody hell is she doing here? Did Crouch fire her or something?" Draco replied, searching around the large room.

Dobby nodded enthusiastically, grinning up at them with his big, peering eyes. "Yes, master Draco, yes!" He squeaked, taking his hand and leading them all towards the room.

As they passed, Harry noticed that the long tables in the room were positioned exactly as the house tables above in the great hall and

that they were probably using these tables to transport the food onto the tables upstairs in the Great Hall.

Passing more elves, who beamed and bowed at the sight of the Potter twins, Dobby finally led them to a pitiful looking elf which sat on a stool by the fire, a bottle of butterbeer in her hands.

“Hello Winky. You know me? I’m AJ Potter and this is Harry and Draco...” AJ greeted gently, raising an eyebrow as she took in the elf’s appearance, from the soup stains in her blouse to the burn in her little skirt, wrinkling her nose in slight disdain.

“Winky is knowing... Winky is seeing you three the night...” Winky’s lip began to tremble. “The night Winky is being set free!” She burst out, sobbing loudly.

Winky burst into tears again, her eyes spilling out tears which began to splash all over her front, making AJ wince in disdain but she ignored it and waited until the sobs calmed down.

“Would sirs and miss like a cup of tea or some food?” Dobby squeaked, not minding Winky, who was still crying helplessly as AJ awkwardly patted her back, trying to comfort her but failing to do so.

“Actually, we *did* come here to have a snack Dobby...” Harry answered, nodding but before Dobby could have a chance to answer, half a dozen house-elves had rushed forward and offered them all a plate of different food.

“I wish the elves at Malfoy Manor were *this* proficient...” Draco muttered as he began chomping into an apple, making the elves all smile and bow gratefully at the comment.

“How long have you been here, Dobby?” Draco asked, rudely situating himself on top of a table as he chomped into his apple, ignoring the slight protest an elf had given him before the elf just shrugged and moved on to another table.

“Only a week, master Draco! Dobby is not finding a job so Dobby came to Prof. Dumbledore... Dobby is not finding a job easily now that Dobby wants paying now!” He squeaked, nodding firmly.

“Well good for you Dobby.” Harry said, smirking at Draco tauntingly before he situated himself on the table beside him, causing some of the elves to eye both rude boys in disapproval as Harry ignored them, popping a chocolate éclair into his mouth.

“Thank you sir! Dobby is liking being free! He wants to wear clothes and paying but he likes work too sir!” He said, grinning up at them both now as Harry and Draco both began eating loudly, causing AJ, who was still awkwardly trying to comfort Winky, to roll her eyes at them.

“So since Winky is freed too, sir, Dobby is thinking he and Winky should find work together so Prof. Dumbledore agreed to hire us and take us on. He says he will pay Dobby sir, if Dobby wants paying! Dobby gets a galleon a week and one day off a month.” He said proudly, beaming.

“That’s not very much...” Draco said mockingly and snobbishly, arching an eyebrow but Harry glared at him to shut up, rolling his eyes.

“I see... Well, that’s not much... How much is Dumbledore paying you Winky?” AJ asked the elf, who was now wailing and screaming loudly as she tried in vain to calm her down.

Instead of calming down, Winky looked at AJ as though she had been insulted, glaring at AJ furiously. “Winky is a disgraceful elf but she is not yet getting paid! She is ashamed she has been freed!” She argued angrily.

Harry and Draco both burst out laughing, smirking at each other and talking about ‘Insane Elves’, throwing conspicuous glances over at Winky in amusement.

AJ ignored them, looking at Winky intently. “*Ashamed?* But Crouch is the one who should be ashamed; he’s the one who—”

AJ didn't finish her sentence as Winky hastily covered her ears to prevent from hearing the rest of AJ's words, shaking her head furiously.

"You is not insulting my master miss Potter! You is not! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard! A good wizard!" She ranted, causing Harry to snigger behind his mouth again, which eventually caused Draco to burst out laughing all over again, making Harry cave in and join him as well.

AJ glared icily at both of them before she grabbed one of the bread rolls set on one of the plates the elves had offered and hurled it at her twin, who deftly caught it in midair and bit off a piece, smirking tauntingly at her.

"Winky, aren't you elves allowed to speak your minds about your masters?" She asked curiously, fusing her eyebrows together and purposely ignoring her twin brother.

Dobby suddenly looked at her with a serious expression, shaking his head as his eyes clouded over darkly. "Oh no, miss Harry Potter's twin..." He began, making AJ stiffen in annoyance at the name and Harry to muffle his laughter behind his hand again.

"We is not allowed to speak ill of our masters! We must uphold the family honor and keep their secrets! But Dumbledore does not agree with this, he is saying we is free to call him a... a *barmy old codger* if we likes, sir..." Dobby whispered, giggling at the idea.

"So what can you say about these Malfoy jerks here?" Harry asked, suddenly throwing a smug look at Draco, who spit out a whole mouthful of tea and narrowed his eyes at his best friend.

"Oh sod off, Harry!" He snapped angrily, causing Dobby and the rest of the house elves to cringe at hearing the curse word, making Draco grin in amusement.

"My poor master! What is he doing without Winky? He is needing my help! I is looking after the Crouches all my life and so is my family... Oh what shame... I is freed!!" Winky burst out again, burying her face in her skirt and bursting out crying again.



AJ couldn't help rolling her eyes at the elf's overacting drama. "Winky, I'm pretty sure your master can handle himself fine, I mean, we see him during the tournament and—"

"You is seeing my master?!" Winky asked, finally looking up and staring at AJ with wide, tear-stained eyes.

AJ arched an eyebrow, suspicious of the elf's concern for her master's presence. "Yes... He and Bagman are judges at the tournament..." She answered slowly, examining the elf's face.

"Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard! Very bad! My master isn't liking him at all!" Winky suddenly ranted, looking very angry as she scowled at AJ.

"I don't either, the stupid asshole....His mouth runs more than his bloody brain" Harry said with a smirk, snorting derisively but AJ glared at him sharply, making him scowl but shut up nonetheless.

"Bagman is bad! Master is telling Winky some things but Winky is not saying! Winky keeps her master's secrets." She said firmly before dissolving into tears again, making AJ roll her eyes in frustration and shake her head. Sighing, she turned and began walking away, knowing she couldn't possibly get another word from the hysterical elf.

"AJ, why should we even care?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow in irritation at his twin as he bit into a cream cake, rolling his eyes.

AJ didn't answer but looked as though she was deep in thought, frowning while Harry and Draco both jumped off the table, gingerly dusting their robes and straightening themselves up.

"Dobby is planning to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter sir!" Dobby squeaked, pointing at his bare chest proudly.

Harry and Draco both smirked at each other and shook their heads in amusement. "Tell you what Dobby, this Christmas, Harry and I here will both get you a brand new sweater, okay?" Draco said, chuckling at Dobby's ecstatic expression.

"Would you both like to have any more sweets?" An elf nearby asked Harry, who promptly shook his head, ignoring the elf completely as he and Draco walked right by towards the door.

AJ frowned at her twin's rudeness, shaking her head and looking at the crestfallen elf, giving her an apologetic smile. "Don't feel bad. Being a jerk is second nature to my egoistic brother..." She said, winking, causing the elf to give her a toothy grin, which she returned with a nod, following after the two boys.

"Harry Potter sir... Can Dobby come visit you sometimes?" Dobby asked timidly, giving Harry a cautious look as though he was going to attack him any minute.

Harry fused his eyebrows together, raising an eyebrow. "Erm, well—"

"Of course you can, Dobby." AJ finished, smiling as she patted the elf on the back before she followed out after the two boys, closing the large door behind her and taking a deep breath as soon as they were out in the corridor again.

"I swear, you two are so rude." AJ mumbled, scowling as she shook her head and stalked off, rolling her eyes as Harry just sniggered behind her and Draco managed a wry smile, shrugging.

"That *Wimpy* sure is stuck on Crouch, seems to love him like a lovesick little puppy dog... Wouldn't surprise me if Crouch was pathetic enough to have an affair with the elf" Harry commented, an amused smile on his face while Draco choked back his hysterical laughter.

AJ whipped around and glared at her twin, narrowing her eyes. "It's *Winky*. And your mind is absolutely *disgusting*." She said wryly. Harry collapsed into laughter again, sneering while Draco just shook his head, trying to hold back his own laughter from bursting out.

"Anyway, she'll cheer up and get used to Hogwarts soon enough like Dobby. Wonder why Crouch seems to have issues with Bagman." AJ wondered out loud, biting her lip as her eyes clouded over in thought.

“Because that man is just plain stupid. I swear, he really irritates me, trying to be my *friend* or something... What a sicko...” Harry muttered, this time causing both AJ and Draco to laugh in agreement, shrugging.

“You amaze me, Potter... You really do, you’re obviously a Slytherin through and through.” Draco commented, grinning in pride as he offered a hand to Harry, allowing them both to perform their handshake as AJ looked on in annoyance.

“You two are too much...” AJ commented weakly, giving them both a small smile.

Harry smirked at her, slinging an arm around her shoulders. “So we’re arrogant assholes...Blow us...” He muttered causing AJ to laugh and punch him in amusement before they both set down the corridor.

Draco suddenly flushed a deep red at the mental image it had caused, his eyes widening into saucers as he followed after them, muttering and cursing under his breath in horror.

“I’m going to head off to the library now okay? I have a couple of things to read up on and some homework to finish for this coming Friday.” AJ said as they entered the common room, beginning to gather the books she had left on the table into her arms as Harry settled himself on an armchair in front of the fireplace.

Draco suddenly looked up at her, looking as though he had just lost an inner argument with his own mind, giving her a grin. “Great! I mean, I have a couple of things I have to finish for the coming week too, we can do it together.” He said, a little too hastily, as he began to gather his own books as AJ eyed him cautiously, her eyes widening nervously as her cheeks flushed with pink.

“Um... Well, I-I’m not sure if you’d want to s-study with me D-Draco, I, well, I’m—”

“Why not? We’ve been studying together for the past three years, why should this year be any different, Potter? And we’re just going to study, not like we’re going to be doing anything... *naughty*...aren’t

we?” Draco drawled, flashing her a sexy smile as he felt some of his Malfoy charm leaking back, giving him confidence.

*Work it Malfoy, work it... Sexy and seductive just might work...In fact, it always works... Make her want to ravish you so badly she can't stand it...*He thought to himself, hiding a smile as he saw the dark look in AJ's eyes.

AJ flushed darker, gulping as her eyes widened even more, throwing a cautious look at Harry, who didn't seem to notice, looking lost in thought as he stared into the fire.

Draco couldn't help smirking as he watched AJ fiddle around nervously, her cheeks growing more and more flushed by the minute and her eyes sparkling with innocence and confusion.

“Why do you two even bother? Homework for *Friday*? You both are such geeks.” Harry said absentmindedly, too unfocused to notice his twin's uncomfortable blush and fidgeting.

“*Some* of us want to get high grades, Harry.” Draco said smugly, frowning when Harry barely heard him again, staring off into the fire as though he had gone into a trance.

“Harry, I forgot to ask, why aren't you wearing your favorite green sweater?” AJ asked, looking at her brother questioningly as she eyed the black cashmere sweater Harry was wearing under his robes in doubt.

Harry blinked and looked down at it, looking confused for a second before his eyes widened in realization, masking them again before he looked back up at his sister's and his best friend's suspicious glares, shrugging.

“I... *lost* it the other day... No big deal, I can buy much more.” He lied, arching an eyebrow irritably.

Draco narrowed his eyes at him as AJ looked at him doubtfully, her eyes suspicious. She blushed, however, when Draco looked back at her and gave her a smile with an expectant look, making her forget about Harry's sweater immediately.

“Well, anyway, let’s go then shall we? Here, I’ll take your books for you.” Draco offered gently, taking the books from her arms.

“No, that won’t be necessary Malfoy, I can carry them myself, you know—” AJ stopped and sighed as Draco ignored her, taking her books and leading her towards the common room entrance, giving Harry one last grin before they both headed out, leaving Harry alone to his thoughts.

Harry barely noticed that his sister and his best friend had gone off as he just sighed, running a hand through his hair. He stared at the growing green flames in front of him, trying to think about the confusing feelings his head had been telling him since his date with Hermione.

He couldn’t understand himself anymore... As much as he was trying to deny it, he knew that he was indeed starting to feel something for Hermione... He couldn’t get the girl out of his head!

*I need to get out of here...* Harry thought in frustration, standing up abruptly and heading out of the Common room, roughly shoving a first year boy out of his way, who squeaked in fear at the sight of him and cowered away with wide eyes.

Not knowing entirely where he was heading, he decided for a moment and began heading off towards Gryffindor towers, having no specific reason except for finding some Gryffindors to torment to take his mind off a *certain* Gryffindor swimming in his thoughtss.

Sighing heavily, he turned a corner, wishing he could talk to someone about what he was feeling but... He couldn’t... He couldn’t tell Draco, that was for sure and he couldn’t even tell his twin sister, whom he knew would freak if she found out Harry fancied her rival...

Plus, how would all his other Slytherin friends react?! It just wasn’t possible, a relationship between him and Hermione would never work out... He shouldn’t let himself fall for her... It would cost too much on his part...

He was just going to go through with this bet as if nothing has changed... And nothing *has* changed.... He would go through

Hermione and go on, forgetting this whole thing ever happened between them... It was for the best... For *both* of them...

He could live on... He could learn to live through this... She would be his greatest victory... *Yes, that's it... Victory...* Harry forced himself to believe, trying to convince himself as he rounded a corner again. *Victory, victory, victory...*

Just as he was about to start his ruthless search for a Gryffindor to torment, he caught sight of a couple caught under a magical mistletoe, suddenly making him sneer in amusement and curiosity, wanting to see and humiliate whoever was underneath it.

*I wonder who it is... Blaise and a Hufflepuff? Weasley and Eloise Midgen? Crabbe with Pansy?* He thought in amusement, taking slow, quiet steps as he approached the unknowing couple, who had barely noticed his presence and were obviously deep in conversation.

His smirk growing, he crept up and watched as the couple both seemed shy of the situation, giving each other a very brief peck on the lips before the girl pulled back immediately, shaking her head as the magical barrier released them.

After what seemed like another long, hushed conversation, the couple finally turned, making Harry's eyes narrow in absolute fury and relentless anger as he caught sight of who they were—Hermione and *Viktor Krum*.

Harry froze for a long moment, his eyes slowly widening in anger and flashing like lightning bolts, processing what he had just witnessed before him as he felt his muscles slowly tightening themselves in tension and fury.

*Krum?? Krum... That... That... Hermione... Kissing...My—* Harry thought, barely able to formulate enough decent thoughts together as his whole form began trembling in rage, his handsome face twisting into an ugly, malicious snarl that would have had Voldemort running and his fists dangerously closing into fists so tight that a trickle of blood had begun dripping down from his palm.

Harry didn't know why but his whole body had stiffened in extreme rage, seeing nothing but blood red all around him as he launched himself forward, causing the couple to spring apart in shock as Harry lunged at the slightly bigger boy, ignoring Hermione's screams of protest.

"Why you *fucking asshole!* I'm going to tear you apart limb from limb you sorry bastard!!" Harry growled loudly as he grabbed Krum roughly by the collar and slammed him into the wall, causing Krum to wince in pain as his head connected with the hard foundation.

"Vhy, you! Potter, let go of me!" Krum protested angrily, shoving him back as Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them helplessly, her eyes wide with horror and disbelief as Harry lunged forward again, managing to hit Krum right in the jaw.

"Har—I mean, *Potter!* Stop it!" Hermione screamed desperately but Harry didn't hear it, his mind screaming nothing more to him except to *hurt*, to *kill*, to *destroy* Viktor Krum for even daring to kiss Hermione, even under a mistletoe, as his eyes flashed with anger, possessiveness and jealousy all at the same time.

"Get the hell off me Potter!" Krum yelled out again as he dodged Harry's punch and aimed a punch of his own at the Slytherin, winding him for a moment as he stumbled back, his eyes glinting with malicious intent.

"*Harry! Viktor!* What the *hell* are you doing?! Stop it! Please!" Hermione begged, nearly in tears as she watched the two boys wrestle on the ground, Harry punching Krum in the stomach repeatedly in rage as though he had lost control of himself and his movements, a *frightening* murderous intention in his eye Hermione had never seen before.

"So it's *Viktor*, now, huh, Granger?!" Harry yelled back furiously at her in disgust for a minute before he turned his attention back to Krum, aiming a punch for his face again.

She didn't know what happened... She had just been heading back to Gryffindor territory when she had forgotten about the mistletoes Dumbledore had warned them all about before, not watching where

she was walking until she had bumped into someone, causing her to stumble back onto the floor.

For a minute, she had wished it was Harry, her eyes sparkling in warmth as she had looked from where she was sprawled on the floor at the guy in front of her but seeing the hunched up figure and the distinct Bulgarian features, she knew instantly that she had been unfortunate enough to bump into Viktor Krum himself.

Ever since she had started to notice how Krum would seem to stalk her all the time ever since he had arrived, Hermione had finally taken the hint from Ron and Seamus that he fancied her and had tried to stay away, not having any interest in the Bulgarian seeker.

Krum, however, seemed to dense to notice that Hermione was avoiding him, continuing to give her unnerving stares in the library or in the corridors when she was with her friends... It was flattering in a creepy sort of way but there was only one guy she could ever actually be interested in and... That was Harry...

That was why she didn't want to give him any accidental hints when they had bumped into each other in the corridor, just giving him a small, friendly smile as Krum just stared back in awe at her, practically drooling as he eyed her new look.

After a long moment of uneasiness on Hermione's part as the Bulgarian seeker just stared at her silently, not having enough guts to say anything, Hermione had tried to walk away but had finally realized that they were trapped under a magical mistletoe barrier and she actually had to kiss the guy to get out.

Wanting nothing more than the floor to swallow her up, Hermione had finally introduced herself, though rather reluctantly but still in a warm, friendly way, and hadn't even bothered to correct him when he had pronounced her name, "*Hermi-own*.", just wanting to get it over and done with.

Then, after years of waiting and watching him open and closing his jaw, Krum had finally managed to introduce himself formally to her, telling her to just call him by his first name and briefly mumbling that he had been wanting to meet her for a long time now.



Hermione had just given him a smile as Krum commented on how beautiful she now looked, making her blush in spite of herself. It was after that when Hermione had explained their situation to the Bulgarian seeker, telling him that she would allow a brief, *small* friendly kiss to let them both carry on and be released from the barrier.

Krum had shown how ecstatic he was but he had barely given her a very brief peck on the lips before Hermione pulled back immediately, not liking the idea of having someone she had just met kiss her like that.

As the barrier had faded away, Krum had unnerved Hermione even more when he had asked if she had a boyfriend or if they could become friends, making her laugh and answer him truthfully, finding the situation rather amusing.

She hadn't expected Harry himself to attack Krum from behind, acting like a wild, enraged animal as he continually punched him in anger, ignoring the pleas Hermione was screaming at them to stop.

It was almost as if... He was *jealous* or something... Like he hadn't liked the way Krum had actually flirted with Hermione, giving her a funny, tingling feeling inside that convinced her that Harry *did* feel *something* for her.... Perhaps in the way she *did* for him as well...

"Your ass is *mine*, you Bulgarian *bastard*!!!" Harry shouted out furiously again, breaking Hermione's deep trance of shock as he aimed another punch at Krum, who blocked it easily and reversed their positions so that he was now on top of Harry, this time repeatedly punching him in the stomach in retaliation.

"Krum! No, stop it! Get off him!!" Hermione protested, trying to pull Krum away but Krum didn't hear her, still punching the Slytherin underneath him, who recoiled in pain before growling again and kneeing him right in the groin, causing Krum to yelp out and roll off Harry, his face twisted in pain.

Hermione shakily helped Harry up back on his feet, her face pale and clammy as Harry eyed her for a second in acknowledgement, wiping the trickle of blood on his chin before he glared down sharply at Krum again, narrowing his eyes.

“Don’t you ever dare touch her again!” Harry spat out, furiously kicking at Krum’s curled up figure on the cold floor, causing him to wince in pain again and cry out, cursing at the Slytherin standing over him.

“Damn you, Potter! Who are you to tell me what I should do?! You’re not her boyfriend! You’re not even her *friend!*” Krum yelled back, wincing in pain again as Harry stomped at him again in reply, smirking sadistically when Krum gasped for air.

“*Potter, stop it!!*” Hermione said angrily, putting a gentle hand on Harry’s shoulder to pull him away from the other boy, her eyes wide as they pleaded for him to stop.

Harry looked at Hermione’s beautiful yet worried features, annoyed as he began feeling his rage softening and letting her pull him back away from Krum a few steps, scowling as he remembered that Krum had actually had the nerve to kiss her innocent lips.

Still tense, Harry turned back to look down at Krum again, who was wiping the blood from his jaw, glaring spitefully up at him which Harry returned with a cold, threatening glare. Pointing at him, Harry spoke to him in a loud, steady and clear voice with such authority that even Hermione felt a shiver run down her spine.

“Don’t you ever touch or come near her again or I’ll hunt you down... I swear, you are one lucky bastard...” He threatened, narrowing his eyes darkly at him.

Krum didn’t blink as he just stared back calmly at him, looking half-angered and half-amused at the same time.

“I don’t know who you think you are Potter but no one tells me what I can and cannot do and whatever you have for *Hermion*-own, I’m sure she does not return to such a selfish jerk like you.” He answered in his thick Bulgarian accent, glaring up at him.

Harry smirked at him in maliciousness, narrowing his eyes at Krum with a superior look on his face that only Hermione could detect as she blushed from Krum’s comment about her not feeling anything for Harry.

“Stupid idiot can’t even get her name right...” He mumbled under his breath in absolute dislike, clenching his hands into fists again.

Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them again apprehensively again, not knowing why they suddenly hated each other so much and feeling rather helpless at the moment before she finally sprang into action, pulling Harry away further from Krum.

“Potter, I don’t know what has gotten into but stop this right now, stay here, I have to talk to you about this.” Hermione said sharply, giving Harry a look to stay where he was before she walked back to Krum and held out her hand to help him up, giving him an apologetic smile as Harry watched them silently.

“Viktor, I’m really sorry about this... I know it wasn’t your fault or anything...” Hermione said apologetically, helping him back up and dusting his robes for him as well, throwing Harry a cautious look.

Krum met Harry’s challenging glare again, both their eyes narrowed at each other in absolute dislike and hatred, their forms tense and rigid.

“It is alright Hermy-own, I understand the Slytherins here are all quite savage, violent and unsophisticated creatures and I do not blame you. I know none of this is your fault and I know you do not like this... *animal*...You deserve better...” Krum told her, though his eyes were still locked onto Harry’s flashing emerald ones, his face twisting in rage.

“You got a problem with Slytherins, asshole?! Huh?! Come over here and say it to my face! I’ll kick your ass all the way back to wherever the hell you came from!” Harry taunted angrily again, flashing his middle finger at him which caused Krum to almost lunge after Harry again if Hermione hadn’t held him back, keeping the two apart.

“Would you two just stop it?! Viktor, it was really nice meeting you and I’m really sorry about this whole thing but I guess I’ll see you around okay?” Hermione interrupted in frustration, looking at Krum intently, patting his shoulder.

Harry saw this and stepped right in between them, shoving Krum farther away from Hermione, stepping in front of her in an almost protective way as Hermione shot him a pleading look again over Harry's shoulder. After what seemed like ten years, Krum finally nodded slowly, wiping at his bloody nose again before he gave Hermione one more last smile, turning to walk away from them and back towards where the Durmstrang lot were staying.

As soon as he was gone and out of sight, Hermione finally turned to look at Harry, who was glaring angrily at her, briefly reminding her of the old Harry Potter she once knew before they had a truce, causing her to widen her eyes in surprise for a minute before she found her voice.

"Harry, what the bloody hell did you think you were doing?! Attacking Viktor like that when he did nothing wrong, what's wrong with you?!" Hermione demanded angrily.

Harry just glared back at her coldly, not saying anything as he turned sharply and began heading off, his robe swishing dramatically behind him again but Hermione wasn't about to let him go off this time. Running to stand in front of his path, Hermione placed her hands on her waist and looked at him in challenge, her eyes demanding an explanation.

"Get the *fuck* out of my way, Granger!" Harry snapped almost reflexively, trying to walk around her and with his fists still clenched very tightly, obviously not knowing where he was heading.

Hermione actually grinned, crossing her arms across her chest as she stood her ground in front of the well-feared Slytherin boy, not at all intimidated by the warning glare he was sending her.

"Back to Granger... Why are you so mad? And I would think you have absolutely no idea where you're going anyway, in case you haven't noticed, this is *Gryffindor* territory." Hermione said slowly, still smiling at him.

Harry didn't say anything as he just cursed out loud and spun around again, trying in vain to figure out which corridor he had come from when he had made his way down towards Gryffindor towers.

"You're the one who's *lost*, Granger—*Lost* your mind! *I'm* not lost or anything, I know exactly where I am going." Harry spat coldly, trying to sneer at her as he looked back and forth between two corridors, narrowing his eyes in frustration when he couldn't figure out which one to take.

Hermione laughed at his growing anger, amused as she followed his footsteps, leading them into a direct circle and back where they had started from, making Hermione giggle harder much to Harry's growing frustration and annoyance.

"Argh! Quit laughing at me *mudblood*, I can't concentrate!" Harry yelled at her as he whirled around the face her, attempting to give her a sneer again. He only angered himself even more when he realized that when he was face to face with *Hermione*, he couldn't seem to do his trademark sneer anymore as though he had suddenly forgotten how...

Hermione noticed his and smiled at him gently, raising a hand to stroke his cheek. "Come on Harry...Trying to give that sneer at me won't work anymore... I can see right through you, you can't do it anymore when it comes to me." She told him softly.

Harry pulled away as though he had been stung, narrowing his eyes accusingly at her in anger. "Why do *you* care?! Go on ahead and take *Viktor's* side!" Harry snapped, pronouncing the name as though it was a disgusting word.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but Harry cut her off, continuing on his angry accusations.

"I don't even understand why you would call that little *bitch* by his first name! You just met the guy and already I see you *kissing* him like that?! That was disgusting Granger! And in the corridor too where someone else might see you!" Harry yelled, making a first year who was passing by look at him in fear.

Harry glared right back at the kid, growling in intimidation. "Fuck off kid!" He yelled, causing the poor kid to jump in surprise and run off in fear, squeaking like a mouse.

“Harry! You didn’t have to do that, and besides I—”

“*Viktor Krum*?! Is that who you’re trying to prove to me?! That ugly loser?! He doesn’t even *compare* to me, Granger! I don’t know what the bloody hell you’re thinking! And after everything, you take *his* side?! Why the hell did you stop me from kicking his ass?!” Harry demanded angrily, walking off again as Hermione hurried after him.

“Harry—”

“The guy *kissed* you, *Hermione*!! He bloody *kissed* you! He had no right but he *kissed* you!! Dammit, he had absolutely no *fucking* right to do that!” Harry practically yelled out loud, making Hermione cringe in surprise.

Hermione gently placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder, stopping him dead in his tracks as he finally let himself calm down and sigh, turning around slowly to face her with an exhausted look in his face, his hair disheveled and his jaw and eye bruised from the fight.

“First of all... Harry, we got stuck under a magical mistletoe, and another....” Hermione’s voice trailed off, giving Harry a small but teasing smile.

“Harry... I don’t understand why you reacted that way... Are you... Are you *jealous*?” She asked, smiling when Harry stiffened and glared back at her indignantly, narrowing his eyes.

“*No*. *Why* would I be jealous? I am *not* jealous, I just really hate that guy’s guts, strutting around here as though he owns the place just because he’s a Quidditch player.” Harry answered defensively, glaring as Hermione let out a soft giggle, shaking her head.

“Sounds *awfully* familiar... And Harry, you don’t have to be jealous—”

“I am *not* jealous! *What* makes you think *I’m* jealous?! I’m Harry Potter, I don’t *need* to be jealous!” Harry snapped back hastily, trying to cover up the rising flush in his cheeks in irritation as he walked on again, still unsure of where he was going.

"I think it's sweet..." Hermione said softly, giving him a smile as she stroked his cheek, making him wince for a minute as her fingers grazed the bruise on his face.

Instead of taking it as a compliment, Harry flushed darker, shaking with anger as though Hermione had just referred to him as a disgusting animal, growing a darker shade of red as he processed what she had said.

"*Sweet?! I am not sweet! I don't do sweet! I was *not* jealous, okay?! Girls all around would flock to me at my very beck and call! Sod off!*" He retorted angrily, running a hand through his hair.

Hermione finally sighed and gave in, dropping her eyes in disappointment and embarrassment at the same time as she felt Harry's angry eyes on her, making her stiffen uncomfortably.

After a long moment of tense silence, Harry finally felt himself softening as he watched Hermione's slightly uneasy form, obviously trying to hold back her tears as she avoided his eyes, not wanting him to see her cry.

Normally, seeing a girl tear up because of him would just annoy him even more and make him snap at her again but seeing Hermione tearing up like that... It only made him want to take back everything he had said...

*What a wimp I'm turning out to be...* He thought, giving in as he sighed and gently enveloped her in his arms, rubbing her back in a soothing manner as Hermione buried herself in his arms, letting the tears flow down her face freely and silently as she felt Harry tighten his arms around her in comfort.

"*Hermione*, hey... I'm sorry...." He said softly, kissing the top of her head as Hermione didn't respond, her face still buried in his chest.

"I guess I really should control my temper huh? I'm really sorry; I didn't mean what I said... You know how I am anyway... Once I'm angry, everything just comes out instantly before I get the chance to think... I'm impulsive." Harry murmured, resting his chin on the top of her head, still rubbing her back to comfort her.

"You forgot something, you're a *Slytherin*." Hermione responded in an almost sarcastic tone, her voice muffled making Harry laugh out loud in agreement, causing Hermione to smile in spite of the situation as she pulled back from his embrace and finally looked up at him, meeting his eyes.

"It's just that... When I saw Krum kissing you... I *wasn't* jealous..." Harry lied, looking away for a minute. "But I didn't like it... I don't know why but I *didn't* like it." He continued, sighing.

"It was nothing, he just—" But Hermione stopped when Harry held up a hand, nodding hastily, not wanting her to reason anything out to him.

"I know, it was nothing. I just don't like the guy... That's all it was... I wasn't jealous or anything." Harry said in denial a little too hastily, making Hermione's heart sink in disappointment again as she nodded, looking away.

She hadn't really expected Harry to actually be jealous of Viktor or anything... It wasn't as though they were a couple or anything anyway and besides...

*Loyalty was really never much of an issue to Harry anyway... He's not my boyfriend anyway... Jealousy is not an issue we should face.* She thought, sighing. *But I had a right to hope anyway right?* She reasoned to herself before she shook her head to clear the thought away, letting out a sharp breath of air.

After another long silence, Harry finally flashed his reckless grin again, making Hermione's heart jump painfully into her throat. She didn't really know why but she had always loved Harry's grin... It always seemed to achieve its effect of making her knees buckle in weakness.

"Tell you what, why don't I make it up to you Hermione? You remember when I said I'd teach you how to fly? How about I teach you tonight?" Harry offered, smirking when he caught sight of Hermione's hesitant look.

"Harry, have you forgotten? We have class tomorrow; it would be pretty stupid and reckless to stay up late! What if we fall asleep in class tomorrow?" Hermione pointed out worriedly.



Harry chuckled in amusement, clasping her hand tightly in his before lifting it up to his lips and caressing it with a gentle kiss, making Hermione blush in response. "Oh, I forgot... I'm talking to Ms. Perfect, good-girl Granger here... Afraid of breaking the rules again Mione?" Harry teased, his eyes twinkling in humor and laughter.

Hermione shuddered, still a little bit unused to her once worst enemy now calling her by her nickname before she glared up at him with an indignant look in her eye, putting her hands on her hips in a haughty manner.

"No! Of course not, Mr., Potter! I can't wait!" She answered, glaring at him as he laughed in response, wrapping an arm around her slim waist and pressing their bodies together, their faces inches apart.

"I can't either..." He murmured, briefly brushing his lips over hers for a millisecond before he smiled at her admiringly again, pushing a stray lock of her hair behind her ear.

"Meet me in the Quidditch pitch in fifteen minutes okay, beautiful? I'm going to grab my Firebolt and get myself fixed up first..." He said, gesturing to his disheveled hair and bruises with a wry smile.

Hermione smiled, nodding as Harry slowly released her, giving her a wink before he attempted to walk off but Hermione held back his arm, giving him an amused smile. "Uh, Harry, the Slytherin dungeons are *that* way." She said, laughing as she pointed to the other corridor, making Harry blush in embarrassment before Hermione tried to head off.

"Oh and Hermione, one more thing!" Harry called out, causing Hermione to stop abruptly, chuckling as she turned to face him.

Harry smirked mischievously at her, raising his eyebrows up and down before he grabbed her and pushed her against the wall, capturing her lips into a deep, passionate kiss. Hermione gasped, caught by surprise for a minute before she responded by wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing him back fervently as she felt Harry's arms tighten around her waist.

Slowly, she slipped her hands under his collar and massaged his strong shoulders gently, enjoying the contact of his bare skin touching her own as Harry seemed to shiver in response, clearly enjoying the feeling as well.

She felt her head spinning when Harry used the wall behind her in advantage to deepen the kiss, making Hermione lose herself in the heat of the moment, moving her hands down to press them against his firm back, enjoying the feeling of heat emanating from his body.

After a long moment of losing her complete state of mind, Harry finally slowed the kiss down, pulling away to let them both catch their breaths as he pressed his forehead against hers again, giving her another lopsided grin.

“Thought you were going away without a kiss huh?” He whispered, chuckling as Hermione blushed in response, too flustered to say anything else.

“Well... See you at the Quidditch pitch, beautiful...” Harry whispered again as he gave her one last brief kiss on the lips before he pulled back and winked at her, heading off with his robes swishing in the silence of the night.

Hermione smiled at the now familiar action, shaking her head as she walked back to the Gryffindor Common Room, her lips still tingling as she touched them gently, the feel of Harry’s lips caressing her own still fresh in her mind.

AJ let out a sigh of frustration, slamming her hand down the table angrily, causing the other students in the room to look sharply at her, which she returned with a piercing glare, sneering at them.

Draco watched her in both amusement and admiration, just content to be with her as he began smiling to himself before he looked back down at his DADA essay, nearly laughing out loud when he noticed that he had only written one thing on it since the whole hour they were there— his name.

They had both decided to sit at the table farthest from Madam Pince, the head librarian, so as to avoid being seen, scolded or anything and

to be out of range of the stares the younger years were throwing at the both of them.

AJ had been quiet the whole time, blushing furiously as she nervously tried to do her needed essays with shaky hands while Draco just looked up at her every now and then, a grin on his face.

*She has no idea how beautiful she looks when she's nervous...* Draco thought in admiration again, before he shook his head furiously and scowled at his own uncharacteristic thought, rolling his eyes.

Just before any of them could utter a word, AJ's eyes had widened as she caught sight of a sparkle at the end of the room at the restricted section, causing her to stand up abruptly, much to Draco's surprise.

"AJ, where are you going?" He asked as he stood up and followed after her, looking around to make sure everyone else were busy studying and sighing in relief when he saw that Madam Pince was not in the room.

AJ immediately headed for the restricted section as though she was in a trance, her eyes wide as they trained themselves on a particular book on one shelf. Draco's eyes widened as he recognized the book she had pulled out, looking around the room to make sure no one had seen them enter the restricted section.

The thick book was entirely black with an emblem of a silver serpent on the front, the serpent's eyes flashing like rubies, making AJ's eyes widen again, looking as though she was mesmerized by it as Draco eyed it cautiously, aware of what had happened before.

*"Forbidden Prophecies, the Blood of the Serpents..."* AJ whispered softly, her fingers briefly caressing the cover before she turned and opened it, her eyes wide and unfocused as though she wasn't in control of herself just as the book began to glow eerily in her hands.

"AJ, wouldn't do that if I were you, last time Harry—" Draco stopped immediately when AJ blinked and let out a sharp gasp of pain, dropping the book onto the floor and clutching her shoulder in just as she heard whooshing sound, the book flashing bright red for split second before it hit the floor and shut itself tight.

“AJ! Are you okay?” Draco asked in alarm as she yelped in pain and hastily began unbuttoning her robe to expose a small part of her shoulder, where they both saw a mark they had never seen before standing out amidst the pale of her skin. The mark was entirely black but it was the shape of a serpent which had coiled around an upright sword, the head of the serpent at the tip of the sword. AJ’s eyes widened at the sight of it.

“I... I never saw this before... It must be a birthmark or something...” AJ said, fingering the mark in shock as Draco eyed it carefully, his eyes narrowing.

“You never saw a birthmark on your own shoulder your whole life until *now*?” He asked, raising an eyebrow at her in disbelief.

AJ rolled her eyes, hastily fixing her robe back on, blushing slightly as Draco watched her with a curious look on his face, his eyes fixed on that spot on her shoulder.

“How come it’s never burned until now? Until *that* book.” He asked as AJ picked up the book again, shoving it back into the shelf in fear before she turned to face him again, shaking her head vigorously.

“I-it’s nothing, it’s probably just a burn or something, look just forget it, come on.” AJ said persistently, looking like she had just snapped out of being in a deep state of trance.

“But—”

“*Coincidence*. Draco, come on, let’s just go back to our table.” AJ said, waving it off as she headed back to their table as though nothing had happened, making Draco frown his eyebrows together in confusion before he shrugged and followed after her, sitting back down.

The two remained silent for several more agitating minutes after the weird incident, Draco staring at AJ to make sure she was alright with his eyes narrowed in suspicion before AJ finally slammed her book shut, covering her face in frustration.

“Argh! I can’t think of anymore to add to this essay! I only need a couple more inches!” AJ hissed, running a furious hand through her hair, acting as though nothing had just happened.

Draco’s face clouded over in confusion again. “AJ, are you sure you’re alright?” He asked again, peering at her in concern as she looked back up and gave him a reassuring smile, nodding.

“I’m fine, Malfoy, really I am... Stop being a paranoid idiot, it’s disturbing.” She teased, giving him a sardonic smile before she turned back to her essay, her eyebrows scrunching together in thought.

Despite his worries however, Draco watched AJ admiringly again for a minute, briefly wishing he could run his fingers through her hair for her before he shook his head and gave her a smile, raising an eyebrow. “What subject is that for?” He asked.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts... Moody is really outdoing himself this time...” AJ mumbled in irritation, rolling her eyes as Draco smirked in agreement.

“Yeah, well... *Two fucking rolls of parchment...* The man is a complete bastard, just wait until I tell father about him...” Draco commented bitterly as he remembered what Moody had turned him into, shaking his head as he tried to hide his own empty essay from view, too ashamed to show her.

But hell, who could really blame him? It was really hard to concentrate on Defense against the Dark Arts and Moody when the most beautiful girl, the girl he had been wanting for three years now, was just right across from him!

AJ laughed lightly, shaking her head. “Haven’t forgiven him for that ferret scene huh?” She teased, making Draco go an interesting shade of magenta.

Draco muttered something which sounded suspiciously like a curse darkly under his breath, making AJ stifle a giggle behind her hand in amusement, shaking her head.

Draco was just about to snap something witty back in reply when he caught sight of a couple of third year girls in a near table, the girls all giggling to themselves and whispering to each other, looking at him flirtatiously.

Ignoring AJ's teasing smirk, Draco mumbled something and took out a sheet of parchment, hastily scribbling something on it before he crumpled it into a ball and threw it at the group of girls, grinning mischievously.

AJ watched curiously as the girls read the note, all of them bursting out into giggles again, before hastily rushing out of the library, ignoring the glare Madam Pince was giving them as they shot another doe-eyed look at Draco before rushing out.

AJ gave Draco a confused look, raising an eyebrow. "What did you tell them?" She asked, fusing her eyebrows together.

Draco gave her a wink, arching an eyebrow in self-satisfaction. "I told them that if they went up to the Divinations tower tonight at midnight, I'll meet them all there." He said, winking.

AJ's smile faltered for a minute as her eyes clouded over for a minute in what looked suspiciously like jealousy before she forced a laugh, shaking her head.

"Typical for your types... Well, have fun then, Malfoy..." She said softly, giving him a small but wry smile before she turned back to her essay.

Draco's smirk instantly disappeared as he looked at her in mild hurt and confusion, a worried frown on his features. "AJ... I was kidding..." He said worriedly, examining her facial features as they formed into a knowing smile.

"I know, I uh—"

"You didn't really think I was going to meet up with a bunch of those giggly bitches did you? I get enough of that from Lila and Dana; I don't have time for worthless women like them. I mean, I know I'm hot

and all but I've had enough of bedding girls, thank you very much." Draco pointed out, rolling his eyes.

AJ looked up at him in surprise, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Really?" She asked, not daring to believe it.

Draco grinned sheepishly, shrugging at her in response. "Well, come on, I never really cared for any of them anyway, I mean, they were all a game to me... Sort of like a challenge... Once the challenge is gone, it gets boring... It made me realize that a relationship won't be able to survive on lust alone..." He pointed out, meeting her eyes intently.

"I...I never knew you were that type of guy, Malfoy..." She whispered, not wanting to believe that the affectionate words that were touching her heart right now were coming from the guy whom she had experienced those senseless fights with for three years.

Draco gave her a bitter smile, his hand finding AJ's and squeezing it tenderly in response. "Well, you never really gave me a chance to tell you, didn't you...? You never really gave *us* a chance to work things out and actually understand each other deeper than we ever did..." He murmured, leaning down to kiss her hand.

AJ nodded wordlessly, her throat too tight to speak as she found herself entranced by his eyes again, feeling everything else around them disappear as she stared into those beautiful silver orbs in front of her.

"I was childish, I know, but I did learn a lot from the past... I mean, after having gone through girls like Lila, Pansy, Dana, Lisa, Mandy... You tend to realize what's really important to you... None of them ever meant anything to me... It was cruel, maybe but they were just for fun..." Draco continued softly, raising a hand to stroke AJ's cheek gently in an affectionate manner.

AJ closed her eyes as she felt his fingers gently caress her cheek, sending bolts of electricity through her skin which continued on to her spine, giving her a warm, tingling feeling inside which made her nervous.

"I realized my mistakes now... That's not what I wanted... That's not what I needed because if it was, then I wouldn't feel so empty and incomplete as I am right now because there will always be girls around me who will be more than willing to give themselves up easily... I want something much more than that..." Draco whispered, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"What is it you want then... *Draco?*" AJ asked softly, slowly opening her eyes to reveal her emerald orbs, which were sparkling with something Draco couldn't quite understand.

Draco gave her a genuine smile, his eyes sparkling with warmth and affection as he answered her question. "After feeling so empty all these years... So alone and unsatisfied... Only one thing comes to mind." He answered, sighing.

AJ looked at him, not blinking as she waited for his answer, her eyes sparkling with admiration, obviously touched by his tender words... She never knew Draco actually had a sensitive side to him... He seemed much more sensitive than her own brother was regarding this... It was so beautiful... Like it gave him a hidden vulnerability... *beautiful...*

"*Love...* To love and to be loved... Someone to accept me... no matter who I am... Someone who can fill the missing piece in my life... Something I never experienced but have been yearning for.. " Draco said, his eyes filling up with a deep sense of remorse the sight of it nearly made AJ lose it completely.

It was almost too much for her to handle... To realize that underneath all the rock hard, calm and collected exterior, he had a human side to him... Somehow, just by realizing this, she had the strangest feeling to just gather him in her arms and hold him tightly until the pain goes away, wanting to be there for him and wanting to be the one whom he shares it with...

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not turning into one of those sappy idiots who will go all out and change, bringing peace, love and happiness to the world just because they're in love... Expecting the world to be all happy moments and all that bullshit... No, I just believe that love is something for everyone... And even someone like me deserves his



own special someone right?" Draco pointed out, hastily flashing her a wry grin to cover it up.

AJ nodded and gave him a smile, reaching over to stroke his cheek gently as well. "... I don't know what to say, Mal—*Draco*, I... uh, I never knew you felt like this..." She said, truly smiling at him in genuine admiration and affection as Draco seemed to lean into the tender caress, placing his own hand over hers and savoring the feeling of how their hands seemed to fit each other perfectly.

They stared at each other for a long time, both of them entranced by the other's eyes for a long time, seeing nothing else but each other until AJ finally coughed, blushing as she pulled her hand back and looked away.

"Well, anyway, I had better finish this essay... I wouldn't want to cram or anything..." She said, hastily drawing the topic away as she avoided Draco's eyes.

"Well, let me see what you have so far." Draco said, grinning impishly as he moved his chair closer to hers, making her tense visibly as he leaned over her shoulder and began reading her essay silently.

AJ tried to relax herself at the sudden closeness of their bodies, feeling her pulse quicken as she tried in vain to ignore the butterflies that were beginning to gather up in her stomach again.

Draco was so close she could feel the heat emanating from his body and catch a faint whiff of the sexy pine-scented aftershave he used, reminding her much more of his presence right beside her. Merlin, how she wanted him at that very moment...

Draco seemed to notice this too as he barely even noticed the essay he was supposed to read but was just staring at her, his eyes studying her features carefully as though he was trying to memorize every detail of her face.

AJ tried to ignore this, turning away but Draco gently gripped her chin, forcing her to look back and meet his gaze. AJ felt her heart pounding painfully against her chest, her breathing increasing rapidly when Draco trailed a finger gently to tuck a strand of raven hair behind her

ear, exposing the crescent moon shaped scar, which he traced for a minute with a fond smile before he looked deep into her eyes for a minute in admiration.

“AJ... You are...*beautiful*...So innocent and pure...” He whispered softly as he gently trailed a his finger down her soft, smooth cheek to her lips, tracing them very softly with his finger as AJ felt them tremble with his touch.

“Draco—” AJ didn’t finish as Draco suddenly leaned forward and claimed her lips with his own, one hand cupping her cheek tenderly and the other wrapping itself firmly around her slim waist, pulling her closer.

AJ didn’t have time to react as Draco deepened the kiss, making her tremble weakly in his arms, her eyes fluttering shut as she helplessly let her arms wrap around his neck for support and to prevent herself from collapsing, clinging onto him.

Draco seemed to smile into the kiss as he let the hand he had on her cheek run through her hair, savoring the way the smooth strands felt against his fingers before he rested his hand on her arm, running it up and down enticingly, making the girl shiver at the friction it caused between them.

Without warning, he pulled away and was soon trailing a line of kisses down her neck, stopping just below the pulse point where he gave a small smirk and bit down lightly, causing AJ to stiffen and bite back a whimper of pain.

Finally needing to separate for air, Draco kissed the sore spot and pulled away, breathing heavily but not loosening the arm he still had around AJ’s waist, causing the girl to squirm uneasily and move away with wide eyes, breathing hard.

“Draco... I... I...” AJ stammered, turning away so Draco couldn’t see the passion and longing she knew she had in her eyes.

Draco slowly gripped her chin again and made her face his gaze once again, both of them staring at each other for another long period of time as different thoughts and confusions ran through AJ’s mind.

Draco was just about to lean in once more when they heard a loud cough behind them, making AJ spring apart from him and look up at Blaise's shocked, disbelieving yet suspicious look as he stared down at them.

"Blaise! I—uh, what are you doing here, I thought—" AJ stammered, turning red as she gathered herself up, running a shaky hand through her now disheveled hair as she tried to collect the things she had on the table.

*Perfect timing Zabini...* Draco thought in extreme annoyance, narrowing his eyes at the still unused parchment in front of him, glaring at it silently in silence.

"Hey... I hope I'm not interrupting anything... I just came to—" Blaise stopped when AJ forced out a slight laugh, shaking her head hastily at him and gesturing for him to sit down.

"No, not at all! Draco and I were just finishing up on all our homework in advance for the week, maybe you'd like to join us." AJ answered hastily just as Draco had opened his mouth to say something, making Blaise look back and forth between the two of them, an understanding look on his face.

"Actually, no, I—uh, just came to... Er... Remind you that you had some other... *stuff* to do, AJ... I wanted to make sure you didn't forget." Blaise said, giving her a pointed look with wide eyes as he pointed to his watch.

Checking her own, AJ's eyes widened in alarm, finally remembering the she was supposed to meet Ron in about five minutes.

"Actually, Zabini, AJ and I were kind of busy so—"

"Damn! I completely forgot, Malfoy, uh, I have to go, I have to do something really important." AJ said in panic, frantically gathering her books and her parchment, ignoring the squeezing in her chest as she saw his disappointed look.

"Oh.... Well, the maybe we can do this again sometime? I'd really like to spend some more time with you, AJ." Draco said, a sincere,

affectionate sparkle in his eye as he flashed her one of his well-known, confident heartbreaker smiles, causing her knees to buckle slightly.

AJ felt her heart melt as she found herself smiling back, raising a hand to stroke his cheek gently again in response, nearly losing herself in his eyes once again if Blaise hadn't cleared his throat loudly when he noticed them, shaking his head sadly to himself.

*AJ is so caught up on looking for love in the place she expects to find it that she doesn't realize it's in the place she was all along...* He thought as he caught the disappointed, longing look in Draco's eyes as AJ pulled back, giving him one last smile before she walked off, dragging Blaise behind her.

As soon as they were near the Astronomy tower, Blaise turned to AJ with a grave look in his eyes, narrowing them accusingly at her. "AJ, are you *sure* you want to go this way? I mean, just *what* were you doing back there?" He asked sharply, looking at her with a stern look in his eye.

AJ sighed, turning away so she couldn't interpret her eyes again, looking at the wall intently as though it was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen and at the same time, hastily fingering the bite Draco had given her, making sure no one would notice it.

"*Nothing*, Blaise, I just—I know what I'm doing. Just let *me* make my decisions... I can do this... And...yes, I am going this way... Ron's the guy I've been wanted for years now, I just hope he feels the same..." She said, nodding to herself in affirmation.

Blaise sighed and placed his hands on her shoulders, looking intently at her with an almost regretful look in his eye.

"I just hope that when you *do* get him, you don't realize that he's not the one you actually *wanted* to have in the first place..." He said softly, sighing.

AJ looked confused for a minute, giving her best friend a dazed, thoughtful look before she stubbornly shook her head and nodded in affirmation, managing a weak smirk at him.

"When did *you* become so dramatic, Blaise? I'd almost think you were in love yourself to understand this." She kidded, pushing him off lightly as she flipped her hair over her shoulder, batting her eyelashes playfully at him.

"Well? How do I look? Seductive enough, would you say?" She asked playfully, trying to force herself to be thoroughly excited.

Blaise sighed, giving in as he shrugged at her, quirking a side of his lips into a weak half-smile. "As always, you're gorgeous. He won't be able to resist." He told her truthfully, shaking his head at his best friend's own foolishness.

AJ forced a smile before she walked off, her robes making the trademark dramatic swish behind her as Blaise stared after her back, biting his lip at his failure to talk to her. *Guess the Potter twins are more alike than we thought... They both enjoy a difficult challenge... Only AJ believes that by winning that challenge, she'll be happy...* He thought silently, sighing.

AJ never noticed the pigtailed girl that had suddenly come up behind her best friend and wrapped her arms around his neck, causing the Slytherin to smile and turn back, enveloping the girl in an affectionate kiss.

As she entered the Astronomy tower, she caught sight of Ron's frame as he leaned over against the balcony railing, staring up at the sky silently in concentration. AJ stood there for a minute, watching him silently from where she was until she hesitantly took one step forward, causing the Gryffindor to whip around instantly in alarm.

"Who's there?!" He asked sharply, raising his wand up to direct the beam of light emanating from it at the Slytherin, allowing him to see the teasing smirk she had on her lips as she watched him.

"You came..." He said, more out of surprise than anything as he stared at her in shock and uneasiness.

"Miss me already, Weasley?" She taunted, smugly crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned against the wall and stared at him, still smirking.

Ron flushed but shook his head vigorously, narrowing his eyes at her. "I just thought that maybe we should meet...I mean, since we *are* both attracted to one another, we could both try it out to see if it works—"

"Secretly." AJ said sharply, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Yeah, secretly and it's not like I'm in love with you or anything and not like this is a commitment but we could at least have a temporary truce for a while... I mean, you're a very beautiful girl, Potter... I'd like to be given the chance to court you if ever..." He told her slowly.

AJ's eyes were wide as saucers now as she stared openly at the boy in front of her in shock. "I uh... I suppose you could... Uh, *secretly* of course... But tell me truthfully, is there anything else about me you actually like other than how I look?" She asked quietly, raising an eyebrow expectantly at him.

Ron bit his lip in panic, looking thoughtful for a minute. "Of course! I also like you uh... Well, I uh... You uh—"

AJ felt her heart sink in disappointment but she ignored it, rolling her eyes in amusement and leaning over to place her lips boldly on the Gryffindor's own, giving him a warm, tingling kiss to interrupt him, knowing he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Ron's arm slowly snaked around her waist, pulling her closer as his other hand rested behind her neck, caressing it gently.

As AJ kissed him back passionately, she couldn't help but feeling another sharp, empty feeling welling up inside her, making her heart squeeze painfully as she pulled back and searched his eyes intently, waiting for something to start bubbling up inside her and waiting for her pulse to start racing but again...it never did.

Ron stared back at her in confusion, blinking as he fused his eyebrows together and watched AJ turn her eyes away sharply, avoiding his gaze. "Is something wrong, Potter?" He asked, turning her face to meet his again, allowing him to see the dazed, uncertain look in her eyes.

AJ looked as though she was going to answer for a minute before she blinked, and shook her head stubbornly to herself and managed a smile again to reassure him.

"It's nothing...I'm fine... And it's *AJ*, Ron." She told him pointedly, rolling her eyes.

"AJ, it is then." Ron murmured in agreement right before AJ leaned forward to catch his lips again, this time shutting her eyes and making herself feel the intensity of the kiss by kissing him with such bold passion that Ron's eyes opened in surprise.

*Don't think of Draco...Don't think of Draco...Don't think of Draco...*She thought helplessly before shutting her eyes in submission, allowing Ron's arms to envelop her in his arms.

*Too late...*

**A/N:** Just to let you all know, this is not going to be the type of story that...well, you know, just because the guy is in love with the girl, he's going to be all sunshine and rainbows and shudder nice... I seriously do NOT like that crap, no offense to those who do of course...  
***PLEASE REVIEW!! PWEASE?? Ciao!***

## Chapter 18- Falling for You

“What took you so long?” Blaise whispered, his voice coated with thick desire as he kissed the much smaller figure of the petite girl in his arms, enjoying the feeling of his arms wrapped around her lithe form and her hands around his neck.

The girl answered him by deepening the kiss herself, briefly running a hand delightfully through his spiked hair as Blaise shivered at the contact, smirking into the kiss.

“I got held up by my housemates... They were demanding to know where I have been hanging out this past week...” Came the rushed, hurried reply as she led him further down the corridor into an empty classroom, shutting the door behind them.

Blaise smirked as she helped him loosen his shirt collar, shaking his head in reply as he impatiently tugged off the girl’s pigtails, rolling his eyes in annoyance.

“Why do you wear these? You’re such a child...” He teased, laughing as the girl growled at him in response, lightly punching his shoulder.

“Well, you seem to like it anyway so don’t complain! Besides, you said it yourself, you think I’m cute.” She said playfully, kissing him on the lips.

Blaise flashed her a wry smile in return, before cupping her cheeks and returning the kiss, feeling another wave of desire overcome him.

“I don’t know why I but I do... You’re very different from the other girls I’ve been with... More childish, that’s for sure.” He said, making the girl scowl and playfully punch him again but he was serious.

“I mean it... The other girls all just wanted to have fun just as I did... Nothing really important... And you’re the only... well, the only *serious* girl, I’ve ever experienced being with.” He admitted truthfully, making the girl blush again.



“And I never guessed this would happen... I’ve always hated your house and the people in it... I still do... But... But I can’t say the same about *you* though. At least... Not anymore...” He said, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t why but Hufflepuffs were always not the best choice to consider for a Slytherin... You’re way too innocent, faithful and well... *nice* for our kind. I can’t imagine a Slytherin ever falling for one... Most especially me after all I’ve done to you and your housemates these years...” He mocked derisively, making the girl’s eyes to narrow dangerously at him in anger.

“And yet, here you are involved with *me*. Apparently, *you’re* the only Slytherin stupid enough to fall for *our* kind.” The girl retorted sarcastically in a bitter tone, slapping his arm in angry indignation.

“*But*, even though it’ll be the death of me if ever any one of my friends find out about this... I’ll risk it for now... Because... As corny and as cliché as this might sound... I... I...” Blaise looked down for a minute for a long period of time as though he was deciding whether or not he should continue but a light dawned upon his gray eyes and he looked back up at the hopeful look of the girl in front of him.

*I will not be making the same mistake I just told AJ not to make... I’ll cast out my mind on this one and follow my heart...* He thought, fear and hesitation bubbling up inside him.

“I love you...” He said softly, stroking her cheek.

The girl’s eyes watered as she stared at him, a shaky smile lighting her face up beautifully as she dared to accept the words she had just come out of the Slytherin’s mouth, not daring to believe it as true.

“I... I love you too... Even before our secret relationship... I just never said it because... I thought you would never love me... I thought you would only like me for sleeping together...” She said, sighing.

Blaise’s eyes clouded over for a minute as he stared at her, tilting her chin up to meet him for him to study her features intently in silence.

“For a while, I thought I never *would*... But after some time... Well... I realized how much of a stubborn bastard I was being and that I could

not fool myself any longer, especially after seeing how much of a fool my best friend was already being for the both of us...Her own mistakes somehow helped me with mine..." He said wryly with a lopsided smile as he briefly remembered just how confused AJ looked a few minutes ago.

The girl gave him a weak smile, laughing through her tears. "Then I guess I'll have to thank your best friend then huh?" She said, smiling.

Blaise suddenly looked nervous, his eyes widening as he stared around the classroom to make sure no one was there.

"I uh... I don't think that's such a good idea at the moment... I'm not sure if AJ will accept this situation right away... Hell, I'm not sure *any* of my housemates would... It would be best to wait for now. After all, who would have thought that after years of tripping your housemates, I'd get together with you?" He said, smirking.

"Do your housemates suspect anything already?" The girl asked cautiously, reaching over and restarting the process of undoing his collar once again.

"Of course not... We Slytherins never bother with each other's business... You *Hufflepuffs*, however, tend to get your nosy faces in each other's way... No wonder your house gets the less action and more bullying..." Blaise said snobbishly, biting back a laugh when he saw the girl's jaw drop at the curse word.

"You dirty-mouthed, rude Slytherin prat! Don't you swear in front of me! Your friends may not care but / most certainly do not want such foul words in *my* conversations! It's downright rude and disgusting! I can't believe you kiss me with that mouth!" She hissed irritably, her eyes flashing as she attempted to hit him in anger.

Blaise chuckled as he caught her fists in mid-air and held them away from his now exposed chest, giving the girl in front of him an impish grin. "I love pissin you Hufflepuffs off... You've got to be the biggest goody-goodies I've ever known..." He said, smirking.

“Now that I have finally done the impossible in having you *not* loathe me and even *touch* me, would it be possible for you to respect my house?” The girl snapped indignantly.

Blaise just smirked wider, switched onto full-Slytherin mode as he leaned forward and caught her lips in a searing kiss again before pulling back and giving her a knowing smile.

“Nope... I still hate your house even though I *love* you. Sorry baby but we Slytherins will always be Slytherins... Whether we’re whipped or not.” He snorted in amusement, laughing when she mock scowled, rolling her eyes.

“But... Blaise... We have to tell them soon... I can’t go on like this any longer... They have to know and even if all my friends discourage me or disapprove of us... I don’t care. I want to be with you.” She said, snuggling herself into his neck.

“But... Baby, we agreed to keep this a secret from everyone else to avoid anyone getting hurt and to avoid messing up *both* our reputations! We can’t just—My friends, they’re all going to hang me—”

“Blaise, I don’t care what your *friends* think or your reputation! I don’t care what *AJ* might think or what the so-called *Slytherin duo* think! This isn’t about *them*, this is about *us*! And if you love me, then you’ll put your reputation on the line for *our* relationship! I’m tired of hiding, of all the secret meetings, of acting like enemies in public... I want a serious relationship and darn it, Blaise, I’m tired of you acting as if you’re so bloody ashamed to be with me!” She burst out, tears streaming down her face.

*Dammit... Why do Hufflepuffs have to be so damn sensitive and dramatic? I swear, if I didn’t love her... Overreacting too... She takes stuff way too personally...* He thought, shaking his head.

Blaise sighed as he wrapped his arms around her, briefly flicking a locking charm on the door of the empty classroom before he turned to her, mouth set into a thin line of thought.

*They'll hate me for it... They'll all hate me for it...* He thought sadly, shaking his head at the mere thought of Harry and Draco finding out that he had dared to associate with a *Hufflepuff*, and *date* or *sleep* with one for that matter but what was the worst was that he had not only done those three things but had also done the unimaginable...

He had *fallen* for a Hufflepuff.... He could just imagine and hear Harry, Draco and even AJ's laughs and taunts when he came out in the open... He could imagine their disgust... Their disappointment, their shame and their disdain... Their...

See the Slytherins had a simple, basic rule that everyone was required to abide by being a part of the tight, respectful Slytherin family: *Slytherins do not and will not date Hufflepuffs*. It was as simple as that and yet he couldn't abide by it... He was pathetic...

He was weak... But at least he wasn't *stupid*... He *knew* he was in love... He knew his situation... And he had accepted it... He just had to let everyone accept it too...

After a long moment of silence, Blaise turned to the girl, studying her delicate, adorable slightly childish features, marveling for a second the irony of things how he could fall for this type of girl as she was the complete opposite of his past girlfriends but he shrugged it off, smiling.

"Just give me time... Okay? I promise... I promise that by the Yule Ball, we'll come out... I *promise*—"

"The Yule Ball?! What do you mean?!" She asked softly, looking up at him.

Blaise hit himself inwardly on the head, cursing under his breath in frustration. He had forgotten that the reason Prof. Snape had told him in advance was because he had been staying late to help him with cleaning the classroom the other day.

Prof. Snape had unintentionally informed him about the upcoming event but had made him swear to secrecy from the other students and if he didn't comply, would have given him detention for a whole month for squealing.

Inwardly groaning, Blaise met his lover's eye again, expressing what he hoped looked like a plea for understanding and agreement in his eyes.

"You'll find out soon enough...And soon after, the whole school will find out about us as well... Just don't mention to anyone else that I told you about it..." He said, wrapping the small girl in his arms again.

The girl looked as though she was uncertain for a minute about his words, doubt and mistrust in her eyes before she allowed a small, unquestioning smile to light up her face, nodding her agreement.

"I understand... You take your time Blaise... I'll wait..." She whispered in reply, almost sadly in a disappointed way before Blaise looked up at her again, a wicked, impish gleam in his gray eyes.

"Great... Now that we've got that sorted out... Enough idle talk and come over here." He urged mischievously, wrapping his arms around her and giving her another hot, passionate kiss.

"With pleasure...." Came the muffled reply as small, feminine hands began to work their way into removing the Slytherin's shirt....

Hermione shivered from where she stood on the Quidditch pitch and pulled Harry's green sweater tighter over her slender form, staring up at the beautiful night sky in silence. She inhaled a deep breath of fresh air, the smile growing on her lips.

With a slight grimace, Hermione looked up, her eyes widening as she imagined herself riding a broom so high up in the air with absolutely no protection from falling right out of the broom back to the ground, causing her to stiffen in mild fear.

More to stop herself from thinking about anything else that might trigger her fear of heights, her thoughts wandered back to Harry's cold, flashing emerald green eyes... The way those eyes had scarily transformed from calm and collected to blindly furious and vengeful...

Though Hermione had to admit that the thought of Harry possibly being jealous of the way Viktor Krum seemed to like her as well and the way the handsome Slytherin had acted as though she was his

girlfriend brought a smile to her face, seeing him lose his temper in such a furious rage like that scared her... It had really scared her...

Sure, back in their second year, she, Ron and Seamus has always had suspicions that either Harry Potter or Draco Malfoy was the heir of Slytherin which was the exact reason why they had taken the time to brew up Polyjuice Potion that same year.

Ron and Seamus had transformed themselves into Crabbe and Goyle, sneaking into the Slytherin Common Rooms and asking the Slytherin duo about the attacks back then but they hadn't gotten any information at the time...

Now... Remembering how Harry's eyes had flashed with something she couldn't quite comprehend as normal hatred or anger, Hermione wasn't so sure again...

She didn't want to bring it up with Harry of course... She had absolutely no right to intrude on his personal business but... She had seen something she never thought she would see in his eyes that time...

Something dark... Something very disturbing and unnatural... Menacing in a way and yet frightening her with intimidation... Almost as intense as the way he had looked before in their second year when he had controlled that snake in Dueling class in front of everyone...

Hermione wasn't stupid so she was getting a lot of doubts and suspicions about Harry's hidden identity... She even doubted if he himself knew about it... She had started to think about it ever since she had seen that strange mark on his shoulder before...

"Thinking about me?"

Hermione blinked out of her thoughts as two strong arms wrapped themselves around her slender waist and a pair of soft lips caressed her neck, making her blush hotly but lean into the embrace, chest to back, her eyes fluttering shut.

At the silent response, Harry allowed his lips into a small, sideways smile behind her, briefly inhaling the sweet scent of Hermione's hair and admiring her now silky brown hair before he gave her one last peck on the cheek, pulling away and grabbing the brooms he had left on the floor.

"I thought so..." Harry said in a low, seductive tone, sending a shiver down Hermione's spine as he flashed her a charming smile, exposing his gleaming white teeth.

Hermione looked up to meet Harry's amused, curious emerald eyes as he stood in front of her shouldering two gleaming, expensive brooms with a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

Hermione rolled her eyes but gave him a grin, nodding slightly in affirmation. "I guess you could say that..." She mumbled before shaking her head hastily and meeting Harry's curious eyes with a smile.

"So... Why do you have two brooms? I thought you were just going to teach me for today..." She said nervously, eyeing the two brooms in slight apprehension.

Harry arched an eyebrow, setting the two brooms down on the grass softly, giving Hermione his lopsided grin.

"Well, I thought you could ride with me first for a start then ride on your own so I took the liberty of *borrowing* my sister's Nimbus 2001 for you... I'm thinking Firebolts are way too fast you, eh Granger?" He teased, smirking at Hermione's annoyed look.

"No they are *not*, I can handle myself just fine and besides, *borrow* your sister's broom? I doubt that, Harry... What did you tell her? That you were going to lend it to *Hermione Granger* while you *help* her with flying?" She asked sarcastically.

Harry grimaced slightly at the thought of his twin's reaction, shaking his head. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her... Besides, she *won't* know anyway..." He said, shrugging as he led them over to a bench among the Quidditch stands.

Hermione took the shiny model of the Nimbus 2001 in her hands, inspecting the broom in slight awe. "Wow... It's in terrific condition... Is this the same broom that Malfoy's father gave the Slytherin team in the second year?" She asked curiously.

Harry chuckled, smirking at the memory as he began removing his robes and folding them on up on the bench.

"Yeah.... I'm the only one on the team with a Firebolt right now though since AJ never really wanted to spend money on a broom when she liked this one...Never really a jock, my sister...More of a geek like you." Harry teased, rolling his eyes when Hermione scowled and punched him lightly on the arm.

"Gee, thanks... Anyway why doesn't Malfoy have one? With a family like his, I'm sure he could easily afford one." Hermione said, rolling her eyes at the way Malfoy always seemed to take so much pride in himself.

Harry looked amused at Hermione's irritation at his best friend, arching an eyebrow in response.

"Well, it's sort of a punishment for being only the third highest in the year after you and AJ... His father expects a lot from him, that's for sure... Anyway, I'm planning to get him *and* perhaps my sister one this Christmas..." He told her.

"A *Firebolt*?" Hermione asked in surprise, her eyes widening at the Slytherin in front of her.

Harry shrugged distractedly, removing his black sweater to reveal a pale green shirt underneath with the Slytherin serpent printed in silver on the chest, making Hermione smile secretly in amusement.

*Doesn't he ever wear any other color besides green, silver or black?* She thought in amusement, shaking her head.

"Yeah...Never really good with choosing presents.. Anyway, why are you so annoyed at Draco? He's my best friend so I know him well enough to say that he's not a complete fucked-up bastard." He said, smirking at her.



"I don't know...He's just an annoying, insensitive and conceited jerk who thinks every girl would want to get into his pants and struts around the school like a bloody royal..." Hermione commented, rolling her eyes.

Harry held back a chuckle. "Well according to you before, so am I..." He said lightly, making Hermione laugh in agreement, shaking her head as a blush rose into her cheeks.

"Well that would explain how you two are best friends and how you can actually understand him when everyone else can't..." Hermione mused for a moment, giving her a sardonic smile.

Harry looked distant for a minute as he thought about the dare that Draco had given him, making him narrow his eyes suddenly and flash coldly, reminding himself of what he had to do and what he *shouldn't* be doing...

"Well... I think we've spent too much time talking, you ready to try this out now, Ms. Granger?" He asked teasingly, hastily changing the subject into something lighter, breaking his gaze away from Hermione's beautiful brown eyes.

Hermione frowned at Harry's sudden distant change of expression, scrunching her eyebrows up in question but Harry didn't seem to notice, raising a hand over his Firebolt and summoning it up to meet his hand immediately before he turned to her with a blank look.

Hermione just gave him an impish smile in return, shaking her head at his serious expression. "You know what I think? You take things way too seriously, Harry... You're way too serious about everything." She told him, raising an eyebrow.

Harry arched an eyebrow in annoyance with a scowl on his face, making Hermione laugh at him in amusement.

"You need to be more relaxed... Scowling so much can give you wrinkles at an early age you know..." She teased, grinning when Harry growled and rolled his eyes, shaking his head at her.

"I *am* not, Hermione, now will you just come here? I want to get this started so we can be up in the air." Harry said irritably but Hermione answered by walking up in front of him with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

"Hermione, what the bloody hell are you—"

Harry didn't get to finish his sentence when Hermione began flashing him the silliest faces he had ever seen, causing the corner of his lips to quirk reluctantly into a smile as he tried to prevent a laugh.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" He asked, keeping his tone of voice steady and unimpressed as he stared at her in what he hoped was a blank expression.

Hermione answered him by flashing another face at him, this time managing to cause a prevent cough of laughter to come out of the Slytherin as he allowed a small smile to grace his lips.

He didn't know why but somehow he had a strong feeling that if any other girl besides Hermione had done that to him, he would have been sorely pissed off but since it *was* Hermione... He couldn't seem to find any other reaction within himself but to laugh and be amused at her antics...

"Stop that, it's not funny, Hermione." Harry tried to say in a firm manner, breaking out into a weak laugh which he blocked by coughing again, furiously trying to set his face back into a look of irritation.

Hermione gave in and flashed him an understanding smile, raising a hand up to stroke his cheek in an affectionate manner as her eyes glinted with warmth directed at him.

"See? You laughed... Don't worry Harry... I won't tell anyone...It'll be our little secret..." She said softly with a fond smile as she traced his scar before leaning over and giving him a soft kiss on the cheek.

Harry felt his heart clench painfully at her words as he turned away as though he had been stung by what she had done, masking his emerald eyes for a minute so that they seemed unreadable.

Somehow, he knew that if he did get himself lost in those damn innocent eyes again, he would forget all about his resolve to do what he came for and let his damn emotions overtake him again... He would not allow himself to be weak once again... He had to fight this... He knew that if he didn't, he would fall all over himself and start acting like a bloody fool once more....

*I can do this... Control Potter, control...* He thought as he pulled back and shouldered his Firebolt again, offering his hand to Hermione in a casual manner as he flashed her a wicked grin.

"Well, as I was saying Hermione, are you ready to go up now?" Harry said hastily, changing the topic as he offered her his hand with a confident smile, which made Hermione narrow her eyes in doubt before she hesitantly took his hand.

Harry held back an amused smile at Hermione's frightened expression as he gingerly climbed onto his broom, floating several feet above the ground as Hermione watched him with frightened eyes, tightening her grip on his hand in fear.

"Harry, I'm not so sure about this anymore.... I don't know if—" She didn't get to finish as Harry cut her off with a laugh of derision, giving her a smirk of pure challenge from as he allowed his Firebolt to float a little higher from the ground.

"What's the matter, Ms. Granger? You scared already? We haven't even started with the lesson yet... I thought you Gryffindors were supposed to be brave." He teased, preventing a smile as he saw the familiar flash of indignation in the girl's eyes.

*I knew she wouldn't back down from a challenge...* He thought in amusement, smiling inwardly to himself.

"Tsch, fine, Potter! I'll show *you* who's a coward! Move over!" Hermione snapped impatiently as she climbed onto the broom behind Harry, squelching the gasp that had almost escaped her when she felt the Firebolt jerk slightly higher, making her gasp lightly under her breath.

Harry laughed out loud, surprising Hermione even more when he turned to look at her with an uncharacteristic sparkle of humor and warm laughter in his normally dark, mysterious eyes, unknowingly sending a shiver down Hermione's spine.

"Well then Ms. Granger, hold on tight... You're in for the ride of your life." He said, winking at her over his shoulder before he turned to face forward again and smirked mischievously, immediately speeding the broom upwards dangerously, making Hermione squeal in surprise.

"Harry!!" She yelled out, laughing slightly as she nervously tightened her arms around Harry's slim yet firm waist, shutting her eyes in fear and not daring to open them to see that they were already so high up in the air.

Harry slowed the Firebolt down slightly when he felt Hermione's form shaking in fear, making him turn and look at her over his shoulder to see in amusement that the girl had shut her eyes tightly, holding onto him for dear life.

"Hermione... Open your eyes..." Harry said softly as he gently began zooming around the Quidditch pitch in a slow, reassuring pace, surprised at himself when he realized that he was actually worried that he might have taken the broom off the ground too dangerously for her.

Hermione took a deep breath and slowly opened her eyes to see Harry's own emerald orbs staring back at her from over his shoulder, his handsome features creased into a worried frown which made Hermione's eyes widen in surprise.

*He's worried about me...* She realized before she felt a strange, tingling sensation begin to bubble up inside her, allowing her to gather enough courage to look around her, her eyes suddenly widening in surprise.

"Harry... The view.... It's beautiful..." She breathed out dreamily as her eyes glazed over in admiration at the beautiful scenery below them from where they were up in the air, making her sigh out loud.

Harry found himself smiling tenderly at her as he shared the scene of the beautiful Hogwarts ground below them, admiring the bright green glow of the Quidditch pitch and the beauty of the whole Hogwarts structure, standing out against the whole field.

“Yes... It is...” He agreed softly, gently swerving the Firebolt before he felt Hermione’s graceful arms tighten themselves around his waist again, slightly making him grin and take one of his hands off the broom handle and place it on top of Hermione’s, caressing it gently.

Hermione blushed from behind him, glad that he couldn’t see her face as she reluctantly rested her chin on his shoulder, giving him a shy yet tender kiss on the cheek which made Harry jerk the broom accidentally downward, causing Hermione to yelp in surprise.

Turning to her with a flushed face, Harry gave her a furious mock scowl. “Don’t do that again, Granger! You want to get us both killed?!” He snapped, making Hermione giggle in spite of herself.

Harry rolled his eyes, holding back a smile as he sped up instantly, diving down the Quidditch Pitch and making Hermione protest in surprise, clinging onto him and shutting her eyes as she felt the wind hitting her face and blowing her hair around wildly.

“Hermione... Flying is just similar to dancing... You have to have skill, grace, athleticism and most of all, trust.. Trust in your own abilities... Don’t think of it as something dangerous, think of it as something you enjoy doing and soon enough, it’ll be like you’re just dancing around in air.” Harry explained softly as he did a somersault in mid-air, making Hermione tense and clutch onto him tighter.

“Harry!! Too high! We’re too high up!!” She protested wildly, keeping her eyes firmly shut and burying her face in the crook of Harry’s neck in absolute fear.

Harry chuckled lightly and slowed down but did another somersault to get her used to the feel of it as he himself closed his eyes momentarily to savor the relaxing feeling of the wind blowing softly against his face and his hair.

“Just don’t look down Hermione... Think of the sky as your dancing floor... You’re free to do whatever you want and to move in any direction you want to go... You can’t get rid of your fear if you yourself continue to fear the act... Just enjoy it... let go of your fear and enjoy it...Open your eyes...” Harry told her gently.

Hermione bit her lip but did as she was told, opening her eyes very slowly just as Harry turned the Firebolt sharply again, making her heart jump in panic into her throat but just as she was about to shut her eyes again, Harry took one of the hands she had wrapped around his waist and gave it a reassuring kiss.

Hermione smiled to herself as she felt the fear inside her weaken immensely, allowing her to gather enough courage to look around again, finally noticing how much more beautiful the sky seemed than the view below.

Different colors zoom by them as Harry flew gracefully and expertly around the entire field at complete ease, somehow giving Hermione a feeling of security and safety as she clung to him, trusting him completely at that very moment.

“See? It’s almost as if I don’t even feel like riding a broom anymore... Just soaring... Soaring up higher and higher... Flying away from everything and everyone...Away from the problems, the pain... Soon, the fear disappears along with the pain... You just have to lose yourself in the feeling.” Harry said, looking distant for a minute as Hermione stared carefully at him, her eyes clouding in question.

“Is something wrong, Harry?” She asked worriedly, resting her chin on his shoulder again in an effort to comfort him but Harry had just flinched away, coughing and shaking himself out of his stupor.

“Nothing... Anyway, you want me to show you what I can really do with this thing?” Harry asked suddenly, his face forming itself into a smirk as he craned his neck to face her nervously widening eyes.

“Well... I—”

“Great! Hold on!” Harry exclaimed, suddenly pointing his broom downwards and blasting on his Firebolt on full speed just as

Hermione tightened her arms around his waist in a death grip but kept her eyes open, suddenly enjoying the feeling as they zoomed downwards, making her squeal in delight.

She could hear his merry laughter as Harry spun them around sharply in a dizzy circle, making Hermione laugh out loud as he stopped abruptly, making her frown her eyebrows in question before he shot out again, this time in continuous somersaults in mid-air.

"Harry, stop it! I'm getting dizzy!" Hermione protested amidst her laughter, playfully pinching his waist to tickle him but it only caused him to smirk and shoot up in a dangerous vertical line, this time causing Hermione's eyes widen in fear.

"Harry!!" She protested as Harry stopped and began zooming downwards again in a spiral, causing Hermione's stomach to lurch dangerously before Harry dived down and landed gracefully back on the ground in an abrupt stop. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair, turning around to flash Hermione a grin.

He held back a laugh as he saw Hermione's eyes blankly wide and her jaw opening and closing in a shocked manner, her hair tangled and sticking all over the place.

"Not bad for your first real ride, eh Granger?" He asked, smirking when she glared daggers at him, scowling as she got off the broom as though it was suddenly lit on fire, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Well, you ready to ride by yourself?" He asked again as he quirked his lips into a half-smile, pulling her into his arms and dropping feather-light kisses on her neck as Hermione finally exhaled sharply, allowing a smile.

"I swear Harry, I am *not* riding with you anymore... You fly way too dangerous for me..." She marveled, leaning into his embrace but Harry had pulled back almost abruptly as though he was scared of the tenderness of the moment, flicking his wand to summon the Nimbus 2001 over to where they were.

"Well, be my guest Hermione, try it out yourself." Harry urged, helping her to climb onto the gleaming Nimbus 2001, turning away for a

moment as Hermione gingerly lifted the broom from the air, looking confused for a minute before she gasped in surprise when the broom sped off, making her clutch onto it in panic.

“*Harry!!* How the bloody hell do you control this damn thing?!” She screamed, making Harry start at the curse word before he began laughing lightly to himself in surprise.

Hermione’s eyes widened as the broom shot upwards, taking her higher and higher as she tried in vain to control it, looking wildly at Harry, who was staring up at her from where he stood on the field with an amused smile, for instructions.

Harry couldn’t help but find the whole situation surprising and very amusing for a moment since this was the first time he had ever seen *Hermione Granger*, of all people, to *not* excel in something...

“Just relax, Hermione! Don’t handle the broom as though it’s a dangerous thing! Just glide it along gently!” Harry called up to her flying form in the sky, still chuckling as Hermione nodded frantically and tried to do what he had said.

“How the bloody hell do you glide it along *gently*?!” She yelled down at him in mild annoyance as the broom took a dangerous swerve, this time making Harry straighten in panic and look up at her in concern.

“Don’t move the handle too much!! Just nudge it gently! It’ll move the way you want it too even with the slightest push so be very gentle with your movements.” He explained firmly, watching as Hermione finally understood and managed to slow down, gently flying around the pitch in a slow-paced manner.

“I think I got it, Harry!” Hermione exclaimed in surprise and delight as she gracefully turned the broom upwards soaring up delicately into the air, her face clearly expressing her exhilaration of the moment.

Harry smiled from where he was, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest as he watched the girl zoom gracefully around the night sky in hidden admiration, admiring the way the wind blew Hermione’s lustrous brown hair into her face and the elated look shown in her beautiful features.



“What am I going to do about you, Hermione....” He mumbled under his breath to no one in particular as he watched her do a very small, very cautious somersault in mid-air just as he did earlier.

As though Hermione had heard his silent question, she turned and gave him a loving smile, her eyes sparkling with warmth and affection, making Harry’s heart constrict painfully as he looked down immediately, breaking the eye contact.

He couldn’t do it... He was a coward... He couldn’t go on with this...Feeling giddy and *happy*, and contented... He could *not*, and he most certainly *will not*, allow himself to fall into this feeling...

*It would never work out anyway... She’s a Gryffindor, I’m a Slytherin... It would never work out... I can’t... I can’t let it...*Harry thought stubbornly, his eyes darkening in denial as he forced his smile into a dark glaring scowl, looking down at the grass coldly.

*It was never meant to be this way...I should have never pushed myself over the boundaries... I should have never delved in too deep with her...I’m only fooling myself...*He scolded himself angrily, narrowing his eyes in anger.

*Draco’s right... I’m a Slytherin and Slytherins only go with their own kind... I can’t afford to love anyone outside of that...*Harry thought, closing his eyes momentarily for a second before he opened them again, the emerald orbs now glinting with the usual mask of malice and arrogance.

*And what is this?! After everything I’ve been through, after everything I have worked hard for... I’m going to give it all up just because I’ve developed ‘feelings’?! I’ve become a weak, sentimental Hufflepuff, for Merlin’s sake?!* Harry raged inside himself, his hands tightening into fists.

*Potter, get out of this! Get out of this while you still can!* A voice inside him screamed just as he looked up again to see Hermione giving him a small, soft smile again, her eyes sparkling, making her seem even more beautiful than Harry had ever seen her.

He didn't think he had ever seen another girl as beautiful as he saw Hermione... There was just something about her he couldn't quite understand that he never saw in any other girl... Something uniquely beautiful about her that made him treat her so differently.

Like, ever since they had met, there was this strange aura radiating from her which always seemed to catch Harry's attention even from a distance in a special way... Something about her that always managed to catch his eye and marvel at her secretly...

She seemed so special and different from all those other girls... Like she had her own special kind of beauty, special kind of beliefs and special kind of attraction to her that Harry never had for anyone else...

No one else made him feel like this... No one else could bring such a bright smile to his face with just a simple conversation or could resist his advances in such a frustrating yet much more admirable way...

The thing about her that annoyed Harry the most was that whenever he was with her... She always managed to get him carried away by his emotions... He lost all his cool exterior... He lost every barrier he had worked so hard to build around himself with just a single smile from her...

He hated the fact that Hermione seemed to hold a lot of his own strings over him... He hated *not* being in control or the fact that someone else manipulates *him*... He *hated* it... He wanted it to end... He knew it was a very cowardly thing to do but he was *terrified* of the idea of what else his growing feelings for the beautiful Gryffindor could make him do or realize...

He was scared of what it might lead to... He couldn't handle something like that... He *never* had and he didn't want to start now.... The idea of something so new and strange to him was enough to scare him away abruptly...

*I have to get out of this now...* Harry thought in panic, his eyes looking uneasy for a moment as he searched the sky for Hermione, finally noticing that she had flown higher and was now soaring up fearlessly into the sky as though she had been flying all her life.

*I have to finish this bet before I get in too deep... I have to end this...I may be a coward but I will not be a 'weak' coward... I can handle this...*He thought just as he looked back up, breaking out of his thoughts.

But why?! Why had he shown too much of himself than he would have wanted to show when he had seen Krum kissing Hermione like that?! Did that really bother him that much? Had he actually felt jealousy for the first time in his life?

Just as he had told Hermione himself, the moment he had seen Krum's hands touching Hermione's flawless porcelain skin, he had seen nothing but blinding red all around him, wanting nothing more than to beat the living hell out of the slightly bigger boy before him.

As much as he didn't want anyone to find out, he hadn't wanted anyone else to be the one touching Hermione except for him... Just the thought of someone else kissing her or touching her brought a look of absolute hatred to his face...

*This is nothing... I just probably got pissed because Krum began moving in on the girl I was supposed I was working on... It'll be gone once I get what I want from her... Just like it always does...*Harry told himself, nodding slightly in stubborn affirmation.

*"Harry!!"* \_

Harry blinked suddenly, snapped out of his deep, ranting reverie and snapped his head up when he heard Hermione's terrified scream, his eyes widening in alarm when he saw Hermione's delicate body thrown off the broom and begin to plummet dangerously towards the ground.

*"Hermione!!"*

He didn't have time to think as he grabbed his Firebolt and shot off into the air instantly, speeding towards Hermione in absolute panic, cursing out loud to himself as he inwardly blamed himself for the accident.

*Fuck! If you hadn't forced her to ride alone, this wouldn't have happened, Potter!!* An annoying voice inside his head screamed at him as he desperately sped up faster, his eyes widening as he feared he might be too late.

"Hermione, hang on!!" Harry yelled at her, mentally cursing his Firebolt to go faster, his hands tightening themselves in a death grip around the handle.

More out of desperation than anything else, Harry changed his direction and dived down with her, knowing he wouldn't reach in her in time to catch her if he tried to stop her fall.

"Harry! What the hell are you doing?!" Hermione asked and soon right after, Harry had deliberately crashed himself into her, grabbing her form and turning her around so that he was on the bottom as they hit the ground. Harry shut his eyes tightly and hissed under his breath in pain, his hands tightening around Hermione's body on top of him.

Hermione stared at him in shock, surprise and disbelief, her eyes sparkling with a different variety of emotions as she stared into the grimacing face of the Slytherin boy, her once enemy, under her.

"You... You saved me..." She whispered softly, raising a hand and gently stroking his cheek, causing Harry to open his eyes slowly, looking up at her with masked, uncertain emerald green eyes.

Harry didn't say anything, just staring up at her blankly as he barely registered the pain throbbing in his back, too absorbed in Hermione's brown eyes which were currently sparkling with something he'd rather not interpret.

"I... I had to..." He answered back in a whisper; wincing again he felt his back sting sharply on the ground, making him shut his eyes in pain for a minute, his form tensing in discomfort.

"But... Why?" She asked softly, raising a hand to gently turn his face back to meet hers, keeping her hand cupped on his cheek as she met his pain-filled gaze.

Harry looked away again, masking his open hostility by attempting to do his sneer but he scared himself even more when he realized once again that he could *not* do it, failing miserably in his attempt.

He couldn't believe it...He was scared... For the first time in his life, he had absolutely no idea what to say... But... This was Hermione... She was different from the others... He didn't know what to say to her...

"I don't know..." Harry mumbled darkly, more to himself than her, refusing to look at her until Hermione once again had to turn his face towards her for her to see the look of absolute confusion and apprehension in his eyes... Something she thought that she would *never* see in him...

"Well... Don't make this a habit Granger... I don't usually throw myself on the ground and hurt my back for Gryffindors that often...I have a reputation to uphold." Harry kidded lightly with a wry smile, trying to break the intensity of the moment but Hermione was unrelenting, fusing her eyebrows together at him.

"What are you so afraid of, Harry?" She asked gently, looking deep into those emerald orbs in question but Harry had masked them so that they showed nothing more than amusement and resentment, narrowing into dangerous slits.

"What the hell are you talking about *mudblood*? I'm not afraid of anything, dammit! Now get the hell off me! The only reason I saved you was to prevent myself from getting in trouble!" He snapped in denial, his eyes flashing as he sharply looked away, hoping Hermione would just get the message and drop it.

For a moment, he thought he saw a flash of hurt in her eyes as she finally turned away as well, sighing heavily to herself. "Harry... We have *got* to stop doing this..." Hermione said, letting out a breath of frustration as she turned away to hide the hurt and sadness in her eyes.

"Stop *what*?! I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!" Harry exploded, clenching his hands into tight fists as he winced in pain again, the sharp pain in his back now burning into him immensely.

"I don't even know what to call our relationship right now! I don't know what we are or if you really care for me at all... I don't know where we're going!" Hermione confessed sadly, slowly rolling off him and lying down on the grass beside him, staring up at the sky.

Harry didn't answer, just staring up coldly at the sky, his eyes dark and unreadable as he furiously fought to keep his façade up, not wanting to give in to anything again... He had made his resolve, he intended to keep it...

"I do *not* want this kind of relationship, Harry... I have to know if you feel anything for me at all... I have to know about what *you* feel... Frankly, you've opened up everything there is to know about you except for how you feel about me... About *us*..." Hermione explained gently, staring up at the stars in silence.

Once again, her only response was a deathly silence as Harry just stiffened beside her, refusing to acknowledge her words and refusing to look at her, glaring up angrily at the sky as though he was blaming everything up at it in to himself.

"Harry, I... I can't help feeling that I'm developing much stronger feelings for you... I don't know why but I can't help myself... And lately, I've been afraid to let them continue because I don't know if they're ever going to be returned in the process..." Hermione continued, biting her lip nervously.

"Hermione... This will never—"

"I *know*, this will never work out Harry! Don't you think I've figured that out by now?! I just want to know if you feel anything for me too, I mean... You've always hidden from that question ever since... I don't know what to expect from you or how to fit you in my life..." Hermione snapped, interrupting him abruptly, causing Harry's eyes to widen slightly in surprise.

"Look... I'm not asking or forcing you into anything Harry...I know you're the type of guy who's not into relationships and I wouldn't want to scare you off... I just want to let you know that I'm not the type of girl who's willing to wait like this forever..." Hermione explained slowly, sighing heavily once again.

Harry listened closely, his eyes narrowed darkly in denial and his muscles tensing in growing irritation as every word that was coming out of Hermione's mouth seemed to stab into him like a knife in the chest.

"Harry, I.. Look, I just hate the hiding... The secrets, The lies... Everything... I'm willing to accept it for now but sooner or later, I'll need to know if I mean anything to you at all... Because if I'm just one of those girls you're planning on bedding Harry, then just tell me right now." She said sharply, looking at him with a piercing stare as Harry refused to meet her eyes again, afraid she might suspect the look of guilt he knew he had somewhere there.

More to save his face than anything, Harry finally broke his silence by twisting his face into an angry smirk, his eyes glinting maliciously. "Are you threatening me, Granger?" He asked darkly, his voice calm and steady betraying the actual remorse and frustration that was welling up inside him.

*Damn her...* He thought angrily to himself as he fought the urge to snap something cold and harsh to her in an effort to make her leave, not daring to believe that she would actually direct him like that.

"No, Harry... All I'm asking for is a chance... For you to give *this* a chance.. To give *us* a chance.. What are you so afraid of? *Why don't you want to fall in love with me?*" Hermione asked, her voice dropping into a hushed whisper as she saw Harry's body tense again at her last question.

"I'm *not* afraid of anything, Granger!! Why can't you just drop it?! I save your ass and you give me this crap?! *Sod off!*" Harry exploded in pure anger, forcing himself to get up abruptly as Hermione's eyes flashed as well, getting up after him and glaring at him as tears began to form in her eyes.

"Fine then! Fuck *you*, you no good, lying *bastard!* I will!" She screamed at him as she stood up and faced him, the tears now cascading freely down her cheeks as she raised a hand and slapped him on the cheek... *hard* but the Slytherin barely reacted, keeping his facial expression neutral.

The harsh, painful sound echoed in the silence of the night before she turned and began to run away, crying softly in heart-wrenching pain as she buried her face in her hands to hide her face in humiliation.

Harry felt a familiar stinging at the corner of his eyes as he watched her stalk across the huge Quidditch field, his cheek stinging in pain and his back now throbbing more than ever but he barely noticed, still staring after Hermione's trembling form.

Her loud, anguished sobs echoed back to him like a sharp knife repeatedly twisting inside as he watched her go, his feet suddenly feeling as though they were ten times heavier than they were as he forced himself to run after her, his pride and his firm resolve temporarily forgotten.

As his own tears began to form rapidly in his eye, Harry desperately reached for her hand and yanked her back into his arms, feeling himself trembling as he held the sobbing girl against him tightly, letting her cry against his chest as he himself let his own tears fall.

Hermione struggled desperately in his arms as her sobs intensified, trying to push him away from her but Harry held her tighter, burying his face in the crook of her neck and crying into her like a child, refusing to let her go.

"P-please... Hermione... I'm sorry... I'm just s-scared okay... I'm *fucking* scared right now... I d-don't know how I feel for you... I'm a b-bloody coward..." Harry stuttered, shutting his eyes as he felt Hermione stop struggling lean into the embrace, still crying softly.

"Why do you keep pushing me away with such harsh words?" She whispered quietly, her voice still slightly bitter with hurt and resentment.

Harry just answered by tightening his arms around her and giving her a shaky kiss on the forehead, feeling hot tears of frustration well up in his eyes again, angering him even more as he inwardly cursed his own emotions.

"I'm—"



“Sorry?” Hermione gave a bitter laugh, her eyes darkening slightly into angry slits. “Now where have I heard that before?” She muttered heatedly, turning away so he couldn’t see the fury still in her eyes.

“I was going to say that I’m a no good, fucked-up piece of worthless crap.” He said softly, causing Hermione to break out into weak, helpless laughter, her shoulders shaking with mirth as she buried her face in his chest, shaking her head.

“Well at least you know what I think of you at the moment...” Hermione said bitterly, turning away so he couldn’t see the pain and dejection in her eyes, sighing as she shook her head sadly.

“All I want you to know is... I’m not up for this if nothing is going to happen in the end... I know how you are Harry... I don’t know whether you’re sincere about me or I’m just another challenge to add to your list...” She admitted softly, taking a deep breath.

Harry just kept silent, choosing not to answer her implied question and feeling as though she could see right through his thoughts, glaring at the ground blankly.

*I can’t say it... I can’t tell her... And I can’t continue this anymore...It’ll be better off if I just end this whole thing right now...I’m way in over my head...* He thought as he pulled away, finally forcing himself to meet her gaze as he raised a hand to stroke her cheek.

Hermione looked at him intently; her eyes searching deep into his questioningly as he gently tilted her face up towards his, their faces only centimeters apart as they studied each other’s features closely.

Just as Hermione opened her mouth to say something, Harry had leaned forward and captured her lips in his with a searing, passionate kiss, his hands immediately moving to wrap themselves tighter around her waist, pulling their bodies closer together.

Hermione felt her knees weaken from under her as she clung onto him for support, her head spinning with exhilaration and her eyes shutting themselves in the heat of the moment.

Breathing hitched, she moved her hands to place them on his firm back, feeling the heat emanate from his body as the kiss grew more passionate by the minute, both of them feeling all their hidden desire for the other burst within their veins.

Harry pulled her closer, deepening the kiss even more, kissing her with such an intense *hunger* that drove away any sensible thinking Hermione had left as she could only respond to his advances, kissing him back with equal longing.

As Harry's lips caressed hers in an almost predatory manner, Hermione could only kiss him back, pressing her lips harder onto his and delighting in the feel on his mouth on hers, her whole body trembling in desire.

She hadn't even noticed when Harry had backed her into one of the Quidditch stands, their lips never breaking apart as his kisses began to grow much more urgent and demanding, a strong surge of desire and wanting bursting inside him that made him lose all sense of control.

Hermione barely registered the fact that Harry's hands had traveled from her waist, moving along her slender form and tugging impatiently at the shirt she still had on and the action itself was enough to startle Hermione back to her senses.

Pulling away, she began to take deep breaths of air, stopping his hands with her own and pushing him back away from her slightly. "No... Wait...Harry..." She managed to breathe out, breathing heavily as she took a step back, sitting down one of the benches to catch her breath.

Harry fought the frustration he felt welling up inside him as he looked at her in shock and question, his eyebrows fusing in annoyance. "What? What's wrong?" He demanded sharply, running a furious hand through his hair.

Hermione looked up and caught his eye, a pleading and desperate look in them as she sighed to herself, shaking her head slowly. "Harry... I—Please understand... I—I'm not ready for something like this yet..." She explained slowly, trying to ignore her racing heart and

the painful pounding in her chest as she stared at the Slytherin in front of her pleadingly.

Harry looked outraged, breathing heavily as well as he narrowed his eyes at her, his jaw open in disbelief.

“*Not ready?! But, Hermione! I—*”

“*Please, Harry! Like I had just told you... I want something more than just this! And besides, I couldn't handle something like this just yet! I need it to be perfect... To be special... I want it to be... I want it to be for love...*” She interrupted gently, turning away to avoid his accusing, mocking glare.

“*Love?! Hermione—*”

“You have to understand Harry... I know you're probably not used to waiting given your experience with other girls... I know you're used to getting what u want right away but *please* understand...” Hermione pleaded softly, looking at him with an earnest look in her eyes.

Harry just stared at her silently his eyes wide and stunned as Hermione turned to face the sky, her face breaking out into a beautiful smile.

“I don't expect you to though and I'm not forcing you to wait for me if you don't have to... You could have anyone else you wanted but if you really want to have *me*, you'll understand.... You'd wait it out...” Hermione's voice trailed away for a minute before she spoke again, this time in a softer tone.

“I don't want one night stands... I want to be sure of what happens outside the bedroom before I try anything *in...*” Hermione finished, looking back, surprised to see Harry's features softening slightly, his eyes glowing with a strange look of anger, impatience yet... *admiration*, at the same time.

“I hope you understand me...” She whispered, slowly rising up from where she was sitting and turning to see the indignant, disbelieving look in his eyes, giving him a weak smile as she gently raised a hand to touch his cheek.

Harry flinched angrily but didn't pull away, just refusing to meet her gaze feeling humiliated and furious at the same time until Hermione leaned forward, gently turning his face towards hers to caress his lips with hers in a very soft kiss, their lips barely touching at all before she pulled back, giving him a smile.

"Thanks for teaching me tonight Harry... Now I understand how wonderful the feeling is up there thanks to you..." She said, her voice barely above a whisper as she raised her wand and summoned the two brooms back to them.

Grasping them in her hands, she turned to face him again, offering a weak smile to calm him down.

"And... Thanks for saving me..." She added quietly, handing the brooms cautiously before Harry took them, still refusing to meet her gaze as his face twisted into an angry glare.

He flinched away from her, his eyes flashing coldly in anger. "Why the fuck are you doing this, Granger?! What more do you want from me?!" He demanded, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"An answer Harry... I want an answer... I... It's the only way I'll be able to trust myself when I'm with you..." Hermione answered softly as Harry's face darkened again.

"Harry... Please don't be that way, I just want to be sure you really care about me because, Harry, I-I love—"

Hermione didn't get to finish her sentence as Harry held up a hand and snapped his head up to finally glare into her eyes, a cold denial and mocking found in his emerald green eyes.

"Good night Hermione. I'll see you tomorrow." He said coldly, indicating that their conversation was more or less over as he shouldered both brooms on his shoulders once more, turning away to walk towards the bench where he had left his robes as Hermione stared after his retreating back.

She watched as Harry sat down on the bench silently, burying his face in his hands in an attempt to calm himself down. "Good night

Harry..." She whispered under her breath, knowing he couldn't hear her as she turned away from the sight.

Sighing heavily and trying to hide the hurt, stinging tears that were forming in her eyes, she turned and began walking back towards the castle, a heavy, sad feeling welling up inside her.

This time, Harry was the one to watch her retreating back, his eyes stubbornly cold and emotionless as he took a deep breath, severely angry with himself for the feeling of guilt and remorse he felt inside him.

But...He could believe it... Hermione had... She had turned him down *again*... And this time, he had felt much more than plain humiliation... She had actually subjected him to humiliation, dejection and most of all, *regret*, all at the same time...

He had actually regretted trying to seduce her once again when he saw the pleading, earnest and sincere look in her eyes... The eyes he knew would look at him with complete hatred and anger when she found out the reason this all started...

Though he knew that Hermione wasn't mad at him for what had happened... He couldn't help but feel so frustrated that she had this much effect on him... He was angry at himself for having a sensitive spot for the girl... Even more now... He hated the feeling that he had to actually make her trust and fall for him so much and then shatter that in an instant when he was finished with the bet...

And what bothered him even more was that after hearing Hermione... Instead of being annoyed... It made him respect and admire her even more... *Merlin...What am I doing? Get a hold of yourself Potter!! It's not as if you didn't experience this before! Get a grip!!* A frustrated voice screamed inside him, startling him enough to break his thoughts.

*Why?! Why couldn't I just go through with everything like I always do?! Why do I have to be so affected? Why do I have to be such an idiot?* Harry asked himself furiously, clenching his bleeding hand once more.

Then, just as he began stalking back towards the castle, he felt a sharp pang of fear and regret as the answer came tumbling down onto him like a ton of bricks, causing him to curse out loud in anger.

As he remembered how beautiful Hermione's eyes had sparkled when she had said that she wanted to give herself only to the person she loved and loved her in return, he realized that.... He had inwardly wished that she had been talking about *him*...

Harry's eyes widened in realization as he barely realized that he had dropped the brooms in shock, his breathing increasing rapidly as he recalled the feeling of Hermione in his arms... The warm, tingling feeling he felt when he had kissed her...

The way that it wasn't only his body that wanted her but also... As much as he didn't want to admit it... Also his heart... It all made sense...

The way he felt when he was with her... The way she seemed to know each and every way to make him smile... The way he couldn't seem to stand seeing the hurt, tearful look in her eyes... The way he felt so different... So relaxed... Like he could actually be himself whenever he was with her...

He never thought he would actually feel that way for someone other than his sister... He never thought he would find such a feeling in someone else... She was just so different than those other girls... He found something in her he could know he could never find in anyone else...

*And how stupid I was to actually be wanting to let that feeling go when I'm probably never going to find another one like it in anyone else...* Harry thought, his scowled features softening at his own thought, his heart tightening even more.

*Oh sweet Merlin...* He thought as his face paled visibly in the dark night. *She can't know! I can't let her know... I can't let her know that...I...*

Harry opened his mouth as he dared to say the words that he had never thought would ever come out of his mouth for someone...

“I’ve... I’ve fallen for her...”

“Sir?”

Prof. Snape looked up from where he sat on his desk to see one of his favorite students, Harry Potter, looking through his chamber door with a rather apprehensive look on his face as he peered inside the well-organized room.

“Yes Mr. Potter? What are you doing up at this hour?” Snape asked sharply, trying to give him a stern glare as he began stuffing his paperwork inside his desk and turning to face him, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Harry gave him a sheepish grin, shrugging nonchalantly as he sauntered inside and plopped himself down on the seat right across from Snape’s desk, breathing in deeply.

“I couldn’t sleep sir... I thought I might ask you about this one problem that’s been bothering me for weeks now...” He mentioned as he watched his Professor stand up and head over to cabinet.

“You know Harry, I’m not the type of teacher you think is going to up and offer *fatherly* advice whenever you need me to.” Snape explained lightly, gingerly pouring two glasses of Whiskey before he sat back down on his seat.

Harry gave a sneer of agreement as he took the Whiskey Snape offered him, shrugging as he downed it almost immediately, eager to let it momentarily forget about his worries at the moment.

“Indeed sir... Which is the exact same reason I came to *you* for help with this... I don’t need a crappy lecture to piss me off even more, I need someone to give me some decent kick-ass advice.” Harry replied casually, not bothering to filter his words in front of his professor.

Snape chuckled at his choice of language, shaking his head slightly as he poured them both another glass, downing it completely himself before he gave Harry a serious look, raising his eyebrows.

“Well... You *do* know Harry that we both have class tomorrow...” He started, raising an eyebrow delicately as Harry’s eyes widened in surprise but Snape continued, ignoring the younger boy’s reaction.

“*But*, in your case, I’ll help make an exception... *If—*” Snape’s voice trailed off as he opened his desk drawer again and pulled out a stack of papers.

Harry fused his eyebrows together in question, looking confused for a minute as Snape handed half the stack of papers to him.

“If you help me with these unsurprisingly *poorly written* Hufflepuff essays I’m supposed to be checking at the moment... I daresay, I haven’t got the time, patience and *stomach* to be checking these out.” Snape told him in obvious disgust, a spiteful snarl on his face as he started on his first one.

Harry smirked in amusement, silently agreeing as he began reading the first one, his handsome features creasing in distaste as he promptly took a quill and hastily signed a flat ‘*Four*’ on top of the parchment.

“Good, good... Now, what did you say was this problem of yours Mr. Potter?” Snape asked, a note of approval in his voice, as he carelessly scribbled something on another essay, not bothering to look up as Harry poured himself some more Whiskey.

“Well sir... It’s sort of a more *personal* problem so if you could guarantee that—”

“You have my word, Harry, that nothing leaves this room. Now, what is this you wanted to talk to me about? Nothing concerning any members of our house now, is it?” Snape asked, looking up from a parchment and peering at Harry quizzically.

Harry stiffened, clenching his hands as he briefly debated with himself whether or now he should tell Snape about his hidden feelings for Hermione.



“Erm... No, Professor... I mean, yes, well... *sort of*...I—” Harry’s voice broke off as he hastily forced another long gulp of Whisky to calm himself down, turning red in frustration.

Snape merely raised an eyebrow in response, peering at him in silent suspicion.

“Mr. Potter, is this another *The-girl-I-slept-with-is-trying-to-get-me-expelled* situations? Were you by any chance foolish enough once again to toy with a girl with a very influential background?” He asked, snorting in laughter.

Harry couldn’t help laughing out loud, another smirk playing at his lips as the implied pun visibly relaxed his form. “Why *professor!* Why on *earth* would you think the *golden-boy* of Hogwarts could do such a thing?!” Harry exclaimed in mock innocence, his smirk growing when Snape snorted again in response, sending both of them chuckling lightly.

“The day this *golden-boy* of Hogwarts does something honorable rather than the usual saving the world crap is the day I dye my hair bright green. Though, I am rather pleased you do not succumb to the whole *noble hero* nonsense... Seems Slytherin has had a great effect on you.” Snape said derisively, smirking as he began reading another essay.

Harry grinned, shrugging to himself as he took another long gulp from his glass. “Thank you sir... Slytherin helped me become my own man... I am *nobody*’s golden boy and I do whatever the hell I want... *No one* owns me and I enjoy the feeling of being feared rather than being *admired*...” He said, scowling in disgust.

Snape’s eyes sparkled with approval before he nodded, not lifting his head up from the parchment he was checking. “Quite right Mr. Potter... Quite right...Now, what’s on your mind?” Snape asked as he flipped over to the next parchment the same time Harry had just marked another essay with another unfairly low grade.

Harry fidgeted uncomfortably, scowling to himself as he moved onto another parchment, taking another swig of Whisky before turning to face Snape again. “Well, see Professor, I’m, uh—I mean, A certain of

housemate of mine... Well... He's well... Ah, see the thing is sir... I'm just curious... In the past... As crazy as the idea might sound uh... Well... Has a Slytherin ever fallen for a Gryffindor?" He asked, wincing as he expected an outburst from his head of house.

However, instead of rant he had prepared himself to receive, he was even more surprised when Snape had just snapped his head up and stared at him with wide, disbelieving eyes, shifting around uncomfortably.

"Er... Would you like some more Whiskey, Harry?" He mumbled, pouring himself another glass and downing it in an instant, turning away so Harry couldn't see the shock and regret in his eyes.

"Don't mind if I do, sir..." Harry mumbled in response, not noticing that Snape had stopped correcting the essays and was now pouring the Whiskey for himself continuously before rubbing his forehead.

"Harry... Who, may I ask, is this supposed *friend* of yours?" Snape asked sharply, narrowing his eyes at him in suspicion at the raven-haired Slytherin in front of him. Harry returned the glare defiantly, his chin raised up in challenge as his proud Slytherin smirk was set firmly into his lips.

"Well, professor, he would prefer to keep it a secret... In fact, he doesn't even know I came here to ask you about this... He's rather fucked himself real bad and he wants to know how to get out of such a situation." Harry explained, his voice calm and steady, betraying the anger he felt for himself raging inside him.

Snape looked deep in thought for a moment before he sighed and set his glass of whiskey down, giving Harry a weak, worn out smirk.

"Well... History does seem to be repeating itself... Harry, the reason we Slytherins seem to always have a tendency to pick on other houses is because... Well, we're all cowards at heart... We may know a lot of ways to get other people in bed but outside the bedroom, we're as clueless as Hufflepuffs." Snape explained grimly, a look of revulsion on his face.

“Why is that, sir?” Harry asked, a dark look flashing in his intense emerald eyes as he watched his professor silently.

“Harry, Slytherin has taught you how to rule, to *fight* and to become powerful but it will never teach you how to understand emotions such as *the love from a lover*...To us, it is all just an amusing game. It always is... *However*...” Snape’s voice trailed off as this time, he drank directly from the bottle, taking a long gulp before he faced Harry again.

“However?” Harry prodded, his eyes narrowing for a minute in slight trepidation.

“Well... I do believe there was a certain case I have witnessed myself when a fellow Slytherin of mine fell in love with a Gryffindor... Rather upsetting really since that Slytherin was a rather close friend of mine...My best friend actually...” Snape said, scowling darkly.

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise as his eyes glinted with curiosity. “What happened?” He asked, taking another long, satisfying gulp of Whiskey.

Snape’s eyes darkened as he visibly tensed at the memory, his hands clenching tightly under the table. “Oh, she married the Gryffindor... Despite all our warnings about the consequences they would have to face.... They didn’t listen...They didn’t *want* to listen and in that time, the war had already begun...It caused a lot of problems and conflicts to say the least but they swore to go through them all together.” Snape explained, suddenly looking worn out.

Harry nodded, listening carefully, watching as a dark, mysterious shadow seemed to appear in his head of house’s eyes, causing Harry to tense in suspicion and doubt. He had a strange feeling that there was something else Snape wasn’t telling him and he didn’t like the feeling of not knowing what it was...

Before he could ask him about it, Snape had spoken up again, interrupting his train of thought. “Well... Though I’ll admit they did have a good, loyal marriage and eventually had children... Well...” Snape’s voice trailed off as he stared directly at Harry, the look in his eyes unreadable.

After a long, tense moment of silence, he shook his head and turned away, sighing deeply. "Harry... What do you know about your mother?" He asked suddenly, surprising Harry with his abrupt change of topic.

Harry's eyes narrowed into slits, a bewildered look on his face as he gave his teacher a questioning glance. "What do you mean sir? All I know is that she was head girl in her seventh year and she was a Ravenclaw... Why?" He asked again, still confused.

Snape shook his head hastily as he stuffed the essays back into his desk drawer abruptly, giving Harry a nonchalant smirk to hide his uneasiness. "Nothing. Anyway, why must we bother ourselves with this, Mr. Potter? It's not like we're the ones stupid enough to fall for a Gryffindor, am I right?" Snape said, snorting derisively as he poured them one last glass, emptying the entire bottle of Whiskey.

Harry forced a laugh as he nervously downed his drink, hoping Snape couldn't see the shame and embarrassment he knew he had in his face.

After another long moment of silence, Harry turned and looked intently at Snape again, a speculative look on his face as he fused his eyebrows together. "Do those relationships ever work out, Professor?" He asked, a solemn expression on his face.

Snape looked back, smirking scornfully to himself in amusement, trying to hide the malice in his voice as he spoke. "Well, that usually depends on the Slytherin involved, Harry... You know how stubborn we all are... It depends on whether or not we choose to... But in most cases... I'm afraid... Most have parted due to the fear of being unaccepted by everyone else." Snape answered truthfully.

Harry nodded, his emerald eyes darkening coldly as he turned away, his features creasing into a snarl of anger and antipathy. "So... *Who* is this supposed *friend* of yours, Mr. Potter? I'm hoping it isn't Mr. Malfoy?" Snape asked suddenly, his face creasing into a disapproving frown.

Harry almost laughed out loud at the idea, shaking his head hastily. Draco would have rather eaten a flobberworm rather than to ever like

a Gryffindor. Heck, he didn't even like sleeping with them as he simply opposed the idea of being with one.

"No, professor... Draco *loathes* Gryffindors... Hell, he hasn't even nailed anyone since we got back, the idiot." Harry smirked, chuckling as Snape gave him a surprised, amused look, raising an eyebrow.

"Is that so? Well, I *do* know the members of my own house Harry and I know for a fact that you and Mr. Malfoy are the two most lusted after boys in the year. You had both better be careful, not all women can be *manipulated* as you say..." Snape commented, a wry smile on his face.

*Now he tells me...* Harry thought in annoyance, sighing as he ran a furious hand through his hair, shaking his head.

"So... Have you figured out the clue of the egg yet, Harry?" Snape asked, carefully rearranging his desk and arranging the papers into their proper drawers.

"Don't worry about it, Professor... I'm pretty sure I can figure it out in one day anyway, there are more important things to worry about." Harry said arrogantly, shrugging carelessly.

Snape gave him a sharp look, raising his eyebrow in disapproval. "I wouldn't get too confident, Harry. That bastard Moody tells me the second task is much more difficult than the first one.. I can't have my champion embarrassing my house out there now, can I?" He pointed out, frowning.

Harry laughed flippantly, rolling his eyes as he gave his professor a smug smile. "Moody? Why should you believe that stupid, paranoid freak, Professor? Besides, it's not as if I can't handle myself anyway." He said confidently, yawning for effect.

"Well apparently, that *freak* has been keeping a close watch on both you *and* me, lately... I don't know what's on his mind but I don't trust him one bit..." Snape said darkly, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"What do you mean, Professor? Has he done anything?" Harry asked sharply, a dark look forming on his features.

Snape shook his head but his eyes were glinting maliciously, a hideous snarl forming on his face. "No, but keep watch Harry... My instincts tell me something doesn't seem right around here... I don't know what it is but I'm certain it's there...Something dark..." He said slowly, his voice calm and steady.

Harry's eyes flashed for a minute, his features forming into a cold, sinister smirk as he settled his gaze on the floor for a minute before he looked up again, his facial features carefully set into a scarily calm and relaxed expression.

Snape looked at him with wide eyes for a moment, a strange hidden fear and anxiety in the potion master's eyes as he eyed his student as though he expected him to blow up any second before he sighed and shook his head, backing away slightly.

"Well... You had better get going now, Mr. Potter... It's late and I don't want you falling asleep in my class tomorrow, especially since I have an announcement to make which I'm sure will be to your pleasure." Snape said, nodding as Harry stood up and prepared to leave.

Harry arched an eyebrow in question, looking at his teacher in interest. "What announcement is that, Professor? That I'm now allowed to strange the first years?" He mocked, causing the older Slytherin to snort in laughter.

"Well, no... But it has something to do with the TriWizard tournament, that I can tell you. Now off you go, go and hit the sack Potter. And I *do* mean, *alone*." He said, giving Harry a knowing smirk, which Harry easily returned before he nodded and left the room.

Snape watched him close the door quietly and listened to the sound of his footsteps fade away down the Slytherin corridor towards the dungeons until he was enveloped in silence once again. Sighing, he buried his face in his hands, shaking his head to himself as he recalled the scary, frightening look he had seen in the young Slytherin's face just a few moments ago.

Groaning, he opened his mouth to mutter something, fully aware that he was talking to himself. "Ah Lily... Your son grows more and more

like you everyday whilst your daughter begins to inherit more from James... They'll have to know soon enough... Albus and I can't keep lying to them forever..." He muttered under his breath, his voice barely audible.

**A/N:** Argh!! Stupid Harry!! Stupid, stupid, stupid Harry!! whacks Harry over the head with a his Firebolt *Stupid Harry!* whacks him again How could you hurt Hermione's feelings like that?! Making her believe that you don't love her when you have already admitted to yourself that you do! whack Argh!! Hehe... Sorry... I'm just a bit pissed off at Harry.. wink Anyway, do any of you have any ideas about Harry and AJ's parents? Snape knows something doesn't he? giggle Ooh... And who *is* Blaise seeing? **PLEASE REVIEW! REVIEW! REVIEW! :)**

## Chapter 19- Tension, Lies and Heartbreaks

“Weasley! Finnegan! Will you both act your age and pay attention?!” Snape growled angrily as he eyed the two, sniggering Gryffindors the next day during Potions class, narrowing his eyes at their childish antics.

Ron and Seamus immediately stopped their little wand ‘swordfight’ under the table, looking embarrassed at being addressed directly and ignoring the sniggers from the Slytherin side of the room.

Hermione gave them both a look of pure irritation and disdain, wrinkling her nose and glaring at them for their childish behavior. Her bad mood seemed to grow even more at their antics, scowling darkly at her table.

She didn’t exactly know why she was acting like such a grouch that morning but ever since what had happened last night with Harry, she had done nothing but frown and sigh.

She knew that though Harry was ticked off at her for blowing him off again, he wasn’t all that mad at her for refusing to get intimate with him... She just couldn’t bear to give in just yet when she knew that the Slytherin was still unsure of his feelings for her...

It was getting harder and harder to keep this from both Ron and Seamus... It was like everyday; the two would give her suspicious glances and ask her what’s up, accusing her of hiding something from them and locking herself out from them most of the time.

Hermione had felt guilty at that but she couldn’t help but feel like she’s in her own world nowadays, having no body to actually talk to about this new... Well... *Sort of* relationship with Harry... She was just too preoccupied with her own worries that she barely spent time with her two best friends anymore and when she did, she would stare off into space, not registering what they were saying to her at all...

She had not even noticed that Ron had not come in until late at night and when she had asked him where he was, he had just blushed and had said that he had gotten lost in the corridors. Ron had been surprised, to say the least, when Hermione had not questioned him



about that, easily accepting his answer and nodding absently, staring deep into the fire with a deep, thoughtful expression on her face.

*Never, in my entire life, have I ever felt so distant and separated from my friends...* Hermione thought sadly as she watched Prof. Snape retort at Ron again, deducting more points from their house but Hermione couldn't care less.

And she felt as though she was betraying them somehow... Blowing them off so many times so she could go and spend some time with their worst enemy... She knew that if they both found out that she actually liked *Harry Potter*, they would freak...

*Although...Like isn't all that you feel for him isn't it?* A nagging voice inside her head pointed out, making Hermione scowl to herself and slump over in her desk, sighing in exasperation.

She couldn't believe how close she had actually come to admitting to Harry last night that she... Well... As much as she tried to deny it now and as much as she wanted desperately to deny it...

*I've actually fallen for the prat...* Hermione thought sadly as she turned to look over at Harry with the Slytherins, the boy chuckling at something Malfoy had just said and giving Neville Longbottom a mocking sneer.

The sad part was... She was almost sure that it was nearly impossible for Harry to feel the same about her...Who was she kidding anyway? Harry was known for breaking hearts... She couldn't be sure whether or not she was about to get hers broken too...

*Or if I can handle it if he does...* Hermione thought, furiously trying to prevent a single tear welling up in her eyes from falling.

He had not even attempted to say a word to her after their whole incident in the Quidditch pitch last night... Hell, he hadn't even so much as *looked* at her the whole day, flinching and breaking eye contact right away whenever their eyes met unintentionally. She didn't know why but she had the strangest feeling that for some reason, Harry was avoiding her... Or at least... For the moment... It

almost seemed as if he didn't want to face her after last night's incident...

*Well what more could he have wanted me to do? I can't give myself to him knowing he's probably going to leave me right after anyway... I still don't know if he's really serious about me...* Hermione thought darkly, sighing.

It's not as if she was revolted at the idea of sleeping with him, it's just... well, she didn't want it to be fueled purely by lust and desire... She wanted it to happen because she actually had feelings for that person and that person felt the same way...

She wanted it to be special...And besides... She was afraid that if she gave herself to Harry too soon... He wouldn't want her anymore... And last night.... Well... It had definitely pushed her off her limits enough to scare herself with the little control she had over her own desire for the gorgeous Slytherin...

It had been rather fortunate that she had managed to think straight to stop anything from happening but she couldn't be sure if she would be able to stop herself again the next time it happened...

*I can't even trust myself to be alone with him again... He already has that effect on me...He has this...'control' over me which I can't resist...* She thought in frustration, shaking her head.

She wanted to make the choice on her own... She didn't want such a precious moment to happen just because Harry had triggered her lust... She wanted the feeling of *choosing* to make love to him... Because she.... Because she *lov—*

"Ms. Granger, I hate to interrupt you from your much more *interesting* thoughts to actually pay attention to my *unimportant* lesson but seeing is that I just *asked* you a question, I'm afraid I will have to deduct another ten points from Gryffindor." Snape drawled slowly, jolting Hermione back to reality as she finally noticed the sneering professor in front of her.

Hermione blinked, confused for a moment as she blushed in humiliation at actually being caught for the first time off guard in class,

turning to see the Slytherins all snigger at her. She turned to look at Harry, who just stared blankly ahead at Snape, refusing to meet her gaze as Malfoy and Zabini both began sniggering next to him, obviously whispering something about her.

Ron looked as though he was going to snap something back angrily at Snape when Seamus elbowed him, causing him to just scowl angrily, his eyes flashing. "Well, Ms. Granger, I asked you a question..." Snape mused, raising an eyebrow at Hermione's bewildered expression, causing her to blink at him again.

"I—I'm sorry sir, I wasn't paying attention... What was the question again?" Hermione answered politely, ignoring Malfoy's snort of laughter as Snape narrowed his eyes in irritation and eyed her in disdain.

"Ms. Granger, I would never have thought that after making yourself look more attractive, it would cost you more than half your brain cells in return. Five points from Gryffindor for not paying attention. Ms. Potter, would you care to answer?" Snape commented scornfully before turning to give AJ an expectant look.

Hermione's jaw dropped open in insult. She flushed dark red, furious at the comment about the way she looked and being referred to as one of those attractive yet dumb girls in school, her brown eyes flashing in anger and humiliation as she glared at the Potion's master indignantly.

*Who does he think he is?!* She thought angrily as she glared holes right through the back of Snape's head, the anger and hatred obvious in her delicate features. Harry caught sight of her expression and suppressed a grin, shaking his head in silent amusement.

"Ms. Potter, if you please." Snape said, giving AJ a smile which didn't seem to reach his eyes as the raven-haired girl smiled back pleasantly, shooting a smug smirk at Hermione before she stood up, a confident look in her face.

"Certainly, Professor. Other significant uses of Ashwinder eggs are that they can be used as an important ingredient for the well-banned love potions and of course, can be eaten as a cure for ague." AJ

answered easily, smiling pleasantly as Snape nodded, almost automatically.

“Very well said, Ms. Potter. Five points to Slytherin. Now, *all* of you pay attention as I will begin to discuss the next potion we are to make for today. Take note, *everyone* listen.” Snape spat carefully, giving Hermione a look before starting the lecture.

Hermione glaring at AJ in absolute anger, her face twisting into a scowl of fury and loathing which AJ returned, her eyes glinting maliciously.

*She may be Harry's twin sister but she is such a bitch! I haven't done anything to her and yet she goes out of her way to make me feel like a complete idiot!* She thought angrily, her eyes narrowing as AJ smirked at her again before sitting down, looking pleased with herself. Then, sighing, Hermione turned away, shaking her head sadly as she felt a familiar, painful pang in her chest, her eyes suddenly dull and weary.

*Well... Harry's own twin sister won't be accepting me, that's for sure...* She thought as she watched Malfoy lean over and whisper something to AJ, his lips brushing lightly over her cheek and his hand resting itself on her thigh.

AJ blushed crimson, slapping his hand away and turning abruptly from him as she fumbled with her ingredients, accidentally dropping a few on the floor. Draco smirked at his, his silver eyes twinkling in laughter as he promptly turned back to listen to the lesson. Blushing, AJ bent down to pick them up, oblivious to the dark jealous glare Ron was directing at Malfoy in return.

Hermione blinked as she noticed the look. *Jealousy?* Hermione thought in disbelief, looking at Ron in shock. Ron noticed her incredulous stare and flushed instantly, giving her a nervous grin before he snapped his head back to look at Snape, an embarrassed flush in his face.

*I get the feeling I'm not the only one who's having problems and keeping secrets...* Hermione thought suspiciously as she watched AJ

nervously flinch away from Malfoy again, hastily meeting Ron's glare for a minute before turning away abruptly.

Moving away from both boys, she edged closer to her twin beside her, who was staring off into space with his dark look on his handsome features, the usual sneer formed on his lips.

Hermione finally shook her head, mentally scolding herself for not paying attention once again before she turned to face Snape again; unaware of the hateful glare that Parvati had been giving her from behind.

Snape had to smirk at the tension and occasional glare or glances he saw amongst the students in the room, shaking his head in amusement. *Teenagers...Very amusing...* He thought for a moment before finally continuing his lesson, holding back a snort of laughter.

After everyone had finished their potion and the bell had rung for lunch, Snape had silenced them all with his trademark glare, making sure that everyone, both Slytherin *and* Gryffindors had remained in their seats.

"Now, before I send you off to lunch, I have an announcement for all of you so *everyone*," Snape gave Hermione a reprimanding look again. "Pay attention." He said sharply, narrowing his eyes at the pretty brunette again, who in turn could only give him a fake sheepish smile, before he turned and faced the students again, giving Harry a sharp look.

"As you all know, the Yuletide season is coming up and as a celebration and tradition of the TriWizard tournament, we will be having our Yule Ball, which I'm sure will be an opportunity for all of us to socialize with our foreign guests." Snape said calmly as the class broke out into excited chatter.

Pansy and Lila both began nudging each other, giggling as they shot doe-eyed looks at Harry and Draco, who both promptly chose to ignore them, barely reacting at all as they just stared back calmly at Snape with smirks on their faces. Parvati and Lavender both glared at the two giggling Slytherin girls in anger, unaware of each other's anger as they both stared openly at the boy they wanted, Parvati

glowering to herself at Harry and Lavender giggling under her breath at Draco.

Ron and Seamus both snorted in disgust, shaking their heads with an amused grin on their faces as they watched the four girls. AJ just looked straight ahead, refusing to look at anyone else as a wary look overcame her features similar to the one Hermione had on her own as she stared over Snape's head at the board, her expression unreadable.

"Now, of course, the Yule Ball will only be for fourth years and above but you *may* invite a younger student if you wish..." Snape continued, a slight disdainful tone in his voice as he imagined one of his students inviting a younger student to the Ball.

"As you all should know, formal attires, meaning tuxes and gowns, should be worn and the party is to begin on Christmas day, eight o' clock until twelve midnight in the Great Hall. I expect all of *my* students, to be fully aware of the proper behavior for this event." Snape said, shooting all the Slytherins warning looks.

Harry and Draco were the only ones who had grinned at him in agreement as Blaise actually paled nervously next to AJ, who was in turn looking as though she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

"Those jerks wouldn't even know the proper behavior for *any* event, much less a party." Seamus whispered derisively to Ron, who held back a laugh, nudging him sharply.

Snape turned to look sharply at him, silencing him with a single glare as Draco let out a taunting smirk at him from where he sat, looking amused at what he had heard them whisper.

"Anyway, as I was saying, I expect my Slytherins to not embarrass our house in *any* way in front of all our guests.. As for you *Gryffindors*... Well... I'll leave that up to McGonagall to discuss..." Snape commented, throwing them a smug sneer.

Hermione barely heard him, throwing a cautious glance over at Harry in question, managing to catch his eye but before she could do

anything else, the Slytherin had snapped his head away again, refusing to look at her.

*Guess that means he isn't thinking or doesn't even want to ask me...* Hermione thought sadly, turning away so no one could see the hurt and rejection in her beautiful brown eyes.

“Oh, and Mr. Potter, you should be informed that the champions and their partners—”

“Partners?” Harry asked delicately, an eyebrow arched in question.

Draco smirked next to him, rolling his eyes at his best friend with a sardonic smile. “*Dance* partners, Harry. Everyone goes to the ball with a *partner*.” He explained slowly, his eyes flicking over to AJ for a minute but the girl didn’t notice; too busy fidgeting with her hands.

Pansy and Lila both burst out into high-pitched giggles again, earning them both an extremely irritated glare from AJ as she whipped around and glared at them, narrowing her eyes. “Would both you giggling bimbos *shut up?!?*” She snapped irritably, her eyes flashing as Pansy and Lila shut up immediately but glared back at her in indignation, giving her a haughty look before they flipped their hair over their shoulder, rolling their eyes.

For some reason, Snape found this particularly amusing as he actually cracked a grin, shaking his head at the students in front of him. “It is traditional that the champions and their partners open the ball by starting the first dance so make sure you’ve got yourself a suitable partner, Potter. Although, I do believe that won’t be much of a problem...” He commented, throwing a look at Pansy and Lila again.

Harry and Draco both laughed out loud as AJ rolled her eyes, shaking her head at their arrogance, not noticing that her pale best friend had gone stiff as a board right next to her.

“Alright, class dismissed.” Snape said, finally allowing the students to leave the room, watching as they all got up and started chattering incessantly, obviously excited about the Yule Ball.

Hermione had gotten up immediately, hastily gathering her things and stalking out of the classroom in a hurry to avoid looking at Harry being fawned over by the other girls, leaving Ron and Seamus hurrying after her. Harry stared blankly after her, squelching down the guilt and sadness welling up inside him again as he sighed heavily to himself, shaking his head.

“Li! You *have* got to help me with my hair! I need to look my absolute *best* if I’m going to get the boy of my dreams to ask me to the ball!” Pansy squealed excitedly to Lila, making sure Harry heard every word.

He tried to ignore them as he gathered his books and walked out with Draco, running a hand through his hair as they both headed down to the Great Hall, the other Slytherins following behind them as usual.

“You planning on asking anyone yet, Potter?” Draco asked casually as they finally noticed the packs of giggling girls in the corridors shooting them flirty looks and smiles when the popular Slytherin duo passed them by.

Harry easily quirked his lips into a sideways smile as he thought of Hermione’s beautiful, confused face at him earlier in Potions... He knew she wanted him to ask her to the Yule Ball... And though he *did* secretly wish that he could go with her, he still didn’t know if he would be ready to deal with the consequences he would have to face if he did...

“Don’t rush me, Malfoy, let *them* come to *me*.” He answered smoothly, carelessly winking at a couple of third year Ravenclaw girls they passed by, causing the whole group to blush and let out a chorus of hushed giggles.

Draco laughed at this, shaking his head as they turned the corridor, turning to look at Harry with a questioning look. “I hope you’re not planning on asking the mudblood, Harry.” He said darkly as they passed Cho Chang in the hall, who flashed them both her charming smile, nodding in greeting.



“Hey Harry, Draco.” She greeted as she passed them with her group of fifth year Ravenclaw friends, most of the girls pausing for a moment to check the two Slytherins out in interest.

They both nodded in response, hastily returning to their conversation. “What’s wrong about asking Herm—*Granger*? How can I carry on our bet if I don’t go with her?” Harry asked suddenly, looking at Draco in irritation.

Draco looked back at him calmly, ignoring the sudden adoring look a pretty Slytherin third year gave him as he passed her, not seeing the heartbroken look on her face when he did.

“Harry, think about it, you have other chances to nail Granger besides the Yule Ball. You don’t have to embarrass all of us by going with *her* during the ball, now do you? Think of the scandal it might cause. Just go with someone else, it’s not like you *care* about her or anything.” Draco pointed out carelessly.

Harry was about to snap something at him when he stopped, catching sight of a fourth-year Hufflepuff they didn’t know walking up to them in the corridor, blushing madly.

“Uhm... Hawwy?” The girl, who was smaller than Harry by a head, asked nervously as she stepped forward, causing Harry to step back as he wrinkled his nose at her frizzy, tangled hair and face, which had a few pimples sprouting out.

Draco instantly forgot his train of thought as he desperately tried to contain his hysterical laughter at his best friend’s horrified face, failing miserably as he began cracking up next to him.

Harry glared at Draco in irritation for a minute before he turned back to the girl, giving her what he hoped looked like his trademark mocking Potter sneer. “Er... Do I know you?” He asked snobbishly, smirking as he eyed the girl in obvious disdain, sniggering out loud rudely, not bothering to hide his derision at the girl.

The girl seemed to flush as she attempted a smile, making Harry cringe away again as he saw the gap in her mouth where her two front teeth should be.

*That would explain the weird pronunciation...* Harry thought in amusement, shaking his head at the girl in horror and disbelief.

"My name is Eloithe Midgen, I-I wath in one of your clatheth in third year..." She said nervously as Harry gave a sharp breath of impatience, rolling his eyes.

"*Look*, uh... *Eloise*, I think that's really sweet but it seems I've got other plans to ask someone else. Now, um, would you excuse me, I'd like to get to lunch." Harry said sarcastically, smirking at the girl's heartbroken look.

"B-but—"

"Look, not to be blunt but one- I *never* date Hufflepuffs, two- I only date *stunningly beautiful* A-list girls, three- I didn't even know you existed until today, four— The *hair*," Harry mocked, shaking his head. "—should make a statement, and *five*, only the *best* for a Slytherin champion. No hard feelings, toots? Why don't you try Greg here?" Harry said sarcastically as he pulled Goyle, who was walking by them with Crabbe, aside and pushed him towards the girl before he stalked off, Draco sniggering as he followed.

"Potter, that was nasty and evil. Even for *you*." He said, laughing as they headed for the Great Hall, making their way towards their usual seat at the Slytherin table.

Harry snorted derisively, rolling his eyes. "Hey, I only go for *beautiful* girls, Malfoy... I can't imagine myself with a *troll*..." He shuddered in disgust, smirking. "That girl must have had her head up in the sky when she thought *I* would actually accept her invite... Who was she kidding? I wouldn't give her a second glance if you paid me." He said in disgust.

"So you don't mind that I dared you to go after Granger?" Draco asked, sneering at him as they sat down the table. Harry turned to glare sharply at him, narrowing his eyes into slits. "Hey, Granger is beautiful, Malfoy! As blind as you are—"

"Well, Potter, when you're right, you're right." Draco suddenly cut off as his eyes widened in surprise when he saw Hermione walk into the

Great Hall with a flustered look on her face as she tried to get away from the different boys who were obviously trying to ask her to the Yule Ball, shaking her head at them hastily.

Harry's eyes widened dangerously as he felt his hands clench dangerously into fists at the sight. *Why those fucking, no-good...* He thought as his eyes slowly narrowed, his hand clasp around a bread knife on the table in front of him as he stared at the boys around Hermione, unaware that he was repeatedly stabbing the table with the knife.

Hermione had turned a bright red as she frantically tried to politely decline the invites from the boys, looking as though she wanted the ground to eat her alive as she finally sighed in relief when they had gone, burying her head in her hands.

Draco opened his mouth to say something when Lisa Turpin, a fourth year Ravenclaw, came up to their table, giving Draco a coy smile as she sat down in front of him on the table, making sure he got a view of her long, slender legs.

Draco arched an eyebrow, unimpressed as he kept his cold glare focused on the girl's face, not bothering to look at her exposed legs. "Nothing I haven't seen or had before, Turpin." Draco said snidely, causing Harry to snort in laughter, shaking his head in amusement.

Lisa looked undaunted, however as she gave a sexy chuckle and leaned seductively towards Draco, enticingly stroking his chest with a single, manicured fingernail as she slowly let her lips linger slightly over the blonde's neck, making him stiffen in irritation.

"Say Draco... What do you say we go to the Yule Ball together... You know... For old times sake...We *always* have so much fun together anyway." She purred, causing Harry to cringe in disgust when he saw Lisa's finger trace a trail down Draco's chest, obviously heading somewhere below the belt.

Draco's eyes widened as he shoved the girl away instantly, looking completely scandalized at what had almost happened. "Look, *Turpin*, it's over between us and no, I do *not* want to go to the Ball with you. I wouldn't go out with you again if you paid me." Draco snapped coldly,

his eyes glinting in malice as he snobbishly dusted his robes as though she had dirtied him and rubbed his neck in disgust where she had kissed him.

“Hmph! Fine, I didn’t like you much anyway!” Lisa said huffily, flipping her hair over her shoulder as several other Slytherins laughed in amusement at the scene, watching as the Ravenclaw stalked off back to her friends, all of them whispering and throwing glares at Draco.

“Hey, what was wrong with Turpin, Draco? She’s pretty hot if I remember correctly.” Harry commented casually, smirking to himself as he briefly let his eyes trail down Lisa’s long legs as she walked away. Draco snorted at this, obviously not amused while Harry chuckled, grabbing a goblet just as the food began to appear on the table.

Draco rolled his eyes in disgust again, shaking his head hastily at the idea. “No way, Potter... She’s not the one I want...” Draco said softly, his voice trailing off.

He stopped abruptly when he noticed Harry’s sudden glare at him, obviously knowing him well enough to read his mind. “I mean, she’s not the one I *want* to ask... I uh... Harry, I wanted to talk to you about something...” Draco said as he nervously searched the table, which was slowly starting to fill with other Slytherins before speaking up again.

“Harry, would you mind if I asked your sister to be my partner for the Yule Ball? I know—”

“No.” Harry interrupted flatly, not even looking up to see Draco’s look of absolute fury and disappointment at him.

“Fuck *you*, Harry! Why am I even bothering to ask *your* permission on this?! I’m asking AJ to the Yule Ball and we are going together.” Draco snapped back firmly, glaring at his best friend in indignation.

“You’re asking my *twin* to the Yule Ball?! You think I’m actually going to let you put the moves on her?! You actually *think* I’m going to let you get into her pants like that?!” Harry exploded, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he glared at his best friend.

Draco glared back, raising his chin defiantly as he met Harry's piercing emerald green eyes in equal anger. "It's not like you're her father or anything, and I'll ask whoever the hell I want to ask, Potter. Besides, do you really think of me that low? I actually *care* for AJ, Harry, as much as you'd want to deny it." Draco snapped back icily, his eyes glinting in malice.

Harry's eyes narrowed at him as his muscles slowly tensed in anger, growling at the boy beside him. "I'm her *brother*, Draco, and if I say—"

"Dammit, Harry! Your sister is old enough to handle herself just fine! In fact, most of the time, she can handle herself better than you do! And who would you rather have her go with? Someone else you don't trust or *me*?" Draco pointed out, his eyes narrowing.

Harry tried to glare back at him but after awhile, he sighed, shaking his head as he silently agreed, though reluctantly, giving Draco a threatening glare.

"Personally, I would rather see her go alone—"

"Oh, come on, Potter, your sister is one of the hottest girls in the year, why would she even bother going alone?" Draco interrupted snidely, causing Harry to tense angrily again at the phrase '*hottest girl in the year*'.

"Ugh... Oh, *Fine*, Malfoy! But I swear, if you so much as lay a *finger* on my sister, you're going to have to answer to *me*." Harry warned darkly, his facial expression letting Draco know that he would be capable of keeping his word.

*Oh I've already done more than just lay a finger on her, Harry...* He thought silently to himself, chuckling as he remembered their kiss in the library the other day, the memory of it bringing a flush of exhilaration on his face.

"Will do...So... Speaking of getting into pants...How are things between you and Granger, Harry? Got her yet?" Draco said, changing the topic so as to make sure Harry didn't change his mind, casually giving Harry a lopsided grin.

Harry instantly stiffened, his face darkening for a minute as he turned away, almost sighing in trepidation. "Almost..." He mumbled under his breath, scowling to himself.

Draco eyed him warily, his silver eyes flashing for a minute. "Almost? What happened? She shot you down?" He asked, sniggering when Harry nodded darkly, his face flushed in humiliation.

"Fuck off... Just give me more time you asshole. I don't see *you* getting any action." Harry snapped impatiently, his anger getting the better of him.

Draco scowled at him in anger, slamming his fist down at the table, causing several other Slytherins there to jump slightly in surprise. "I don't *want* any action. If I wanted action, I'd get it easily with one snap just as I always do. And at least I don't grow *soft*." He mocked, causing Harry to glare at him.

"I am *not* growing... *soft* on Granger okay?! I just—" Harry's voice trailed off as he nervously tried to think of possible words to say, ignoring the look Draco was giving him.

"I just... I need a little more time and then, I'm breaking it off immediately. That's why I'm planning to ask *her* to the Yule Ball... No harm in going with her now that she's gorgeous, right?" Harry lied, forcing a laugh.

"Who cares if everyone faints with shock at the sight? I'm planning on finally bedding her that same night afterwards so I can break it off the next day." Harry said, an almost sad tone found in his voice, his eyes dropping.

Draco didn't seem to notice as he shrugged, helping himself to some roasted potatoes, nodding distractedly. "Fine, fine, Harry, that sounds great. Anyway, after you nail Granger, could you maybe start on working on that egg? Wouldn't want you to embarrass us all in front of everyone, champion." Draco quipped carelessly.

Harry looked at him in disbelief and growing anger, his eyes narrowing at him. *How the fuck can he talk so carelessly about Hermione like that?! Doesn't he even care at all? He talks about*

*dumping her as if he was just asking if me if I did my Potions homework!* An angry voice raged inside him but Harry chose to ignore it, sighing.

Harry glared silently at Draco but before he could answer, they both caught sight of another Ravenclaw heading for them with a flirtatious smile on her face directed at Harry. Sighing in exasperation and avoiding Draco's taunting smirk, Harry groaned inwardly before turning to face the pretty girl with a mocking sneer, similar to Draco's earlier.

*This is going to be a long day...*

"Who are you asking to the Yule Ball, Blaise?" AJ asked as she and her best friend walked slowly through the corridors, AJ hastily avoiding the numerous interested stares boys were giving her as they passed by.

Blaise blinked, snapping out of his stupor as he turned blank, bewildered, gray eyes to the girl beside him, fusing his eyebrows together. "Huh? I'm sorry, what did you say AJ?" He asked dully, his voice so flat and monotonous as he gave her a blank stare again, his eyes strangely unfocused.

AJ's eyes narrowed slowly as she took in her best friend's state of mind, finally realizing that he had been silent all day, obviously something roaming his mind that was worrying him immensely. "I asked you who you were planning on asking to the Yule Ball? Merlin's beard, Blaise, what's wrong with you today?" AJ asked suspiciously, fusing her eyebrows at him.

Blaise sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair, finally causing AJ to realize that he hadn't spiked his hair as he normally he did, leaving it straight and unruly. "Bloody hell, Zabini! No spikes today?!" AJ teased, playfully ruffling his hair, causing Blaise to snap away irritably, growling in annoyance.

"Sod off! I'm not in the mood for your games today, Potter!" He growled, causing AJ's eyes to widen in surprise, holding up her hands in a surrender pose.

"Alright... Sorry. Back off, Blaise... Anyway, I'm just curious, come on! Who's on your flavor for the Ball?" AJ pressed persistently, throwing an arm over his shoulders playfully. Blaise shrugged her off in annoyance again, opening a mouth to respond when AJ suddenly held a hand up to stop him, grinning at him.

"Wait, wait! Let me guess... No doubt it's another Ravenclaw... You have a liking for Ravenclaws don't you? Hmm..." She wondered out loud, raising an eyebrow in thought.

"No, it's not, I—"

"No wait! I know! You're going to invite a Hufflepuff, aren't you? You just *love* those Hufflepuffs." AJ said, giving him a sneer of amusement as Blaise suddenly paled, looking at her with wide eyes.

"*Hufflepuff?*! What do you mean?! N—no! I haven't been with any Hufflepuff, AJ! I swear! I don't know what you're talking about! What are you implying?! Blaise blurted out defensively, shaking his head hastily at her and giving her a shaky, what he hoped to be an *innocent* smile.

AJ arched a delicate eyebrow in surprise for a minute as she stopped walking and took a step back from him, slowly narrowing her eyes in growing suspicion now. "Blaise, I wasn't implying *anything*...It was a *joke*...I know you would rather eat a slug mingle with a Hufflepuff." She said slowly, looking at him intently, searching his nervous expression.

Blaise visibly relaxed, letting out a nervous breath as he forced himself to give a shaky, nervous laugh, running a hand through his hair to calm himself. "I... I know, I uh.. I knew that.. I was kidding as well." He replied, forcing another fake laugh as he shrugged and shook his head, trying to calm the suspicious look AJ was giving him.

"So... Uh, who do *you* want to go with? I mean—"

"Blaise, I'd rather not talk about that right now... If I could choose, I'd rather not go with either two right now... I'd rather go alone." AJ answered, sighing heavily to herself as she briefly remembered what had happened last night.



She and Ron had spent a lot of time up in the Astronomy tower, barely talking at all as they just spent most of the time kissing or flinging sarcastic comments at each other. They had both agreed that it wasn't something they would call a *relationship* and that they did *not* owe each other loyalty or anything else... That they were still enemies despite their crushes on one another...

She didn't want to tell him but it had actually *hurt* when he had said that... Here she was, fancying this boy for three years now and when she finally got his attention, she had been disappointed, to say the least, that he had not been the person she had been expecting him to be...

In her dreams, she had imagined that when she *did* hook up with Ron... That there would actually be love and sincere affections for each other... That he could be the perfect boyfriend, treating her in a special way like her brother did and making her feel as though she was the most precious, most special girl he knew...

She had never expected that him... A Gryffindor... That just because she was a Slytherin, could treat her as though she was the most embarrassing thing alive... Could make her feel so cheap and worthless, almost as if she wasn't human at all... Sure, they *were* enemies before and all that but Ron couldn't seem to forget their past rivalry, treating her as the same Slytherin 'prick' as he called them, until now..

He couldn't learn to set aside their past hostility to accept her friendship... That was why AJ had found his arms so cold and unwelcoming... It was so different from the way she had felt in Draco's arms...

Nothing else had happened last night other than that of course... She had made sure of it. AJ didn't want to think of intimacy at all... She wanted *that* to be special and at the moment... She couldn't be too sure if Ron was really the person she wanted to share it with...

She had to admit, it was rather fun and watching the redhead continuously deny his growing attraction to her was amusing but... It had hurt her to know that Ron had seemed to feel so ashamed of being with a Slytherin...

And... Though as she much as she tried to deny it... There was something else missing in their kisses... Something she couldn't quite explain or figure out... And though secretly, it had angered her when the Gryffindor had the nerve to act so normal the next day as though nothing had happened... She had thought that being a Gryffindor, he would have been better but he wasn't...

And then... There was that kiss with Draco... The way his eyes had sparkled beautifully with such warmth and laughter... The sincerity in his voice... The way his gaze seemed to burn right through her...

Though she would never admit this to anyone, no other person had ever made her feel the way Draco did... He just had this really weird way of making her feel as though she was the only thing that mattered... It was an intense, passionate feeling that seemed to bubble inside her every time she stared into those deep, intense silver eyes...

She didn't understand herself at most times... With Ron, she had always been so relaxed and in control... She knew how to tease him in a way without losing herself in the moment.... *She* was in charge most of the time and she knew how to handle herself just fine... She enjoyed that feeling of control she knew she had over herself

But with Draco... Everything just seemed so unpredictable... She lost all her sense of control and willpower... Like she was a waiting bomb that could do nothing else but wait for him to light the fuse...

With Draco, every sensible thought just vanishes from her head and she seemed to melt onto the floor... Somehow, she could seem to act the same cool, calm collected way she was when she was with Ron... She lost everything and *he* was the one in control..

And what annoyed her most of all was the way that Draco could trigger her passion for him instantly with just a single touch or caress and at the same time trigger her *anger* with a single word or action... He seemed to have that effect on her and she didn't like it one bit...

Maybe it was because Draco knew her inside out that he could affect her so easily... He seemed to understand her in a deep sense that

despite the effect he had on her, she could feel so calm and safe and...*happy* in his presence...

Well, whatever the case was, whenever she was with him, it seemed as though she had no power over her own body and actions... Though she knew *he* was in control of her, she trusted him enough not to do anything that might hurt her... She felt a deep sense of security and comfort with him...She knew he would never hurt her in any way...

"*Why* does he affect me like that so much?" AJ whispered out loud, forgetting that her best friend was still beside her.

"Why does *who* affect you like *what*?" Blaise suddenly asked, breaking her train of thought as he gave her a questioning smirk.

AJ blushed instantly, shaking her head as she scowled at him for intruding on a private question. "Nothing. So... Who's the girl, Blaise?" She asked suddenly, changing the topic as she crossed her arms over her chest at him.

Blaise's smirk instantly disappeared as he glared at her, his gray eyes glinting dangerously for a moment, widening in slight panic. "Girl?! There's no girl, AJ, no girl! It's not a girl, I just—" AJ's eyes widened in shock at that, her jaw dropping to the floor at his statement.

Blaise's eyes widened even more, hastily shaking his head at her horrified expression in a vigorous manner. "*No!* It's not a *boy*, either! I'm not like that, you bitch! I meant—" His voice trailed off as AJ began giggling uncontrollably, turning away from him to hide her amusement.

Blaise glared at her from behind, his features forming themselves into an angry scowl. "Oh, sod off you! And besides, I'm just a little tired... I need a little more sleep..." He lied, still scowling.

AJ turned and faced him, a smirk formed on her lips as she eyed him warily. "Hmm... I see... Well, that would be due to the fact that you've been out late every night now, Blaise... Don't think I haven't

noticed... Who have you been seeing?" She asked, her smirk growing wider.

Blaise reddened, growling as he turned away abruptly from her and stalked off towards the Great Hall, muttering angrily to himself under his breath.

"Alright, alright! I'm sorry, I won't intrude on your personal life... Or rather.. Your well... *love life*... But you started it when you intruded mine. Anyway, seriously now, who *are* you asking to the ball?" AJ asked hastily hurrying to catch up with him.

Blaise slowed down, letting out a sharp breath of exhilaration as he ran a hand through his disheveled hair again. "Oh I *have* got a girl in mind... I uh—"

"Well? Who is she?" AJ prodded, her emerald green eyes wide with curiosity.

Blaise shook his head, giving her a smug smile. "I'm not telling... You'll find out at the Ball... It's a surprise..." He drawled easily.

*Boy, will you 'all' be surprised that I'm dating a Huffle—*

"Ugh, what for?! What is she, like super gorgeous or something?! Who is it, Zabini?!" She demanded, scowling at him.

Blaise just chuckled as they rounded the corner, shaking his head. "You'll find out soon enough AJ, I promise." He said, giving her a wink for effect.

AJ just rolled her eyes, annoyed as Blaise walked on, ignoring the demanding glare she was giving him as she stared after his retreating back. She was just about to call for him when she heard hurried footsteps behind him but before she could turn around, a familiar voice called out to her.

"Hey Amanda!"

AJ and Blaise both whirled around to see Cedric Diggory chasing after them, his hair tousled and slightly out of breath as he caught up, breathing heavily.

“Cedric, what’s up?” AJ greeted, giving him a smile as she gestured for Blaise to go on ahead, nodding at him.

“I’ll meet up with you in the Great Hall, Blaise.” She said as Blaise nodded, turning and continuing down to the Great Hall, a confused frown on his features.

AJ turned to face Cedric’s slightly hesitant smile, giving him a smile in return to hide her confusion at him. “Hey, Ced, you need anything?” She asked, fusing her eyebrows together as they continued to head for the Great Hall.

Cedric just laughed, shaking his head at his own nervousness as he shrugged at her. “I’m not really very good at this... Anyway, I was just wondering if you already had a date for the Yule Ball coming up...” He started, giving her his handsome smile.

AJ’s eyes widened in surprise as she gaped at the popular, head boy in front of her, not daring to believe what was coming next. *Oh Merlin... I was definitely ‘not’ expecting that...* She thought in panic as her eyes began roaming desperately for somewhere or someone to help her hide, not knowing what to say or do.

“I uh... Well... Actually—” She began nervously, trying to find the right words to say.

“Cause I was thinking... That is, if you’re not going with anyone else... Maybe we could go together... I’d really appreciate it if—”

“Cedric... I uh, I thought you liked Cho Chang.” AJ said hastily, remembering what Cedric had told her in her third year during one of their tutoring sessions that he had fancied Cho Chang ever since his fourth year at Hogwarts.

Cedric looked genuinely surprised, looking at her with wide eyes.

“Cho? Cho’s my best and closest friend... She’s literally almost like a sister to me and I care for her very much but I don’t see her that way... Well... Not anymore I guess...” He explained, laughing slightly to cover up the sudden sadness in his face.

AJ frowned when she thought she saw a sad, sparkle in Cedric’s eye when he mentioned Cho’s name which looked suspiciously familiar to *longing* but she shrugged it off, sighing.

Cedric colored immediately, coughing as he turned away and refused to meet the Slytherin’s gaze, sighing. “Oh...” Was all AJ managed to say as she stared at the seventh year in understanding, nodding to show him that she was listening.

“Anyway, ever since our third year, I’ve thought you were a great girl, Amanda so... Well...Technically, it isn’t a *date-date* but I would really like it if *you* were my partner for the ball.. I mean, I wouldn’t want to bring those giggly girls that keep flirting with me all the time...” He said, shuddering for effect as AJ laughed.

AJ opened her mouth to respond when Cedric cut her off again, suddenly looking incredibly hesitant. “Of course, if you’re already going with someone else, I’ll understand. It was just an idea.” He told her, giving her another charming smile.

AJ sighed as she stared at his earnest face, realizing that she didn’t have the nerve or courage to say no... Even though her small crush for Cedric had died months ago... *Well... Going with Cedric is better than having to decide between Ron or Draco...*She thought to herself as she inwardly shrugged, considering the idea.

*Besides...It’s probably the best away to avoid any scandal in the Yule Ball... I don’t think I’m ready to face Draco ‘or’ Ron at the moment...It’ll be better to just go with a friend than someone else...*She concluded, her eyes clouding over in thought.

*And... Well... Going with Cedric can actually be much more fun than going with either of those two...There wouldn’t be any tension and I can actually relax, that’s for sure...At least I can be sure that the relationship is strictly platonic since he obviously likes someone else...*She thought in amusement.

“Amanda? Is that a no?” Cedric asked, breaking through her thoughts as he gave her an expectant smile, his eyebrows raised up in a polite look of anticipation.

AJ blinked, dazed for a minute, before she laughed slightly, shaking her head at his worried features before flashing him a warm, friendly smile. “Of course not, Cedric, I’d... I’d be happy to go to the Yule Ball with you.” She answered slowly, forcing herself to return the smile that had suddenly lit up on the Hufflepuff’s handsome face.

Cedric seemed to cheer up instantly, letting out a nervous breath of relief as they reached the doors to the Great Hall, giving her a grateful smile. “Great! Thanks so much, Amanda! You won’t regret it, we’ll have a lot of fun, I promise.” He told her, grinning.

AJ forced another grin back, ignoring the sinking feeling in her stomach as she entered the Hall with him, nodding in agreement. “I’m sure we will too, Cedric... I uh, well... I’ll see you then.” She said as she began to head towards the Slytherin table, sighing helplessly.

“See you around, Amanda.” Cedric replied cheerfully as he headed back to his own house table, smiling at his seventh year friends in greeting.

AJ slumped down in her usual seat beside Blaise, frowning for a minute before she began helping herself to some food, desperate to get some food in her mouth to prevent anyone else from asking her out.

Blaise, for once, didn’t notice his best friend’s moodiness as he just picked miserably at his food, a dark scowl similar to AJ’s on his handsome face. *Jeez... Now I wonder how all my housemates will react...How ‘Harry’ will react when he finds out that I’m the partner of his rival at the tournament ‘and’ I just agreed to go with a ‘Hufflepuff’...* She thought miserably, shaking her head at herself.

However, if she hadn’t been so caught up in her own worries, she would have realized that she, Blaise *and* Harry were all miserably picking at their food while Draco seemed to be the only one with the usual smirk on his face, eating his lunch quietly.

AJ just winced at her own thoughts, imagining the rant her twin brother would give her when he found out that she had dared to go with Cedric, his opponent and other than that, he was a Hufflepuff, which, according to all other Slytherins, is strictly off limits.

“Harry?” She suddenly spoke up, looking up to meet her twin’s dark gaze, wincing as she opened her mouth again to speak.

“I uh—”

“Hey, Potter.” A voice interrupted, causing both Potters to look up instantly to see Ron Weasley at their table, looking at AJ with a slightly anxious expression on his face.

Draco and Harry both tensed as they saw him, their faces twisting into identical glares at the Gryffindor in front of them. “What are *you* doing here, Weasley?” Draco sneered coldly, eyeing the other boy up and down in absolute loathing and challenge.

Ron turned red in anger but met his challenging glare with a glare of his own, refusing to be intimidated by Draco. AJ just waved her hand at the Slytherin duo, indicating for them to stop as she turned weary eyes to the redheaded Gryffindor, arching an eyebrow in question.

“What is it, Ro—Weasley? What do you want?” She asked weakly in what she hoped was a spiteful voice, raising both eyebrows now.

If possible, Ron reddened even more, avoiding Harry’s warning, death glare as he turned to look at the raven-haired girl in front of him.

“I uh... Potter, willyougototheYuleBallwithme?” He rushed out in panic, his words barely understandable as AJ’s eyebrows fused together in confusion.

AJ blinked in disbelief. “Pardon, Weasley?” She asked, looking at him again. Draco’s eyes had gone dangerously wide as a frightening glint of fury flashed in his normally calm silver eyes, making Ron step back in surprise for a second.



"I said... Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?" He mumbled under his breath again, not seeing AJ's eyes widen in surprise and horror when she heard the words he had just said out loud.

*Merlin... I forgot this guy is a Gryffindor... He's bloody 'brave' enough to ask me that in public!!* AJ thought in panic as she turned nervous eyes toward Harry, who seemed to have used his frustration to explode immediately, attempting to get up but AJ yanked her brother down again, almost in fear.

"Hey Weasley! Who the *fuck* do you think you are?! My sister is smart enough *not* to go with someone like *you*! You stay the hell away from her or I'll break your face! You understand?!" Harry exploded angrily, his eyes flashing like lightning bolts.

"Oh yeah? Why should I listen to *you*, Potter? I think your sister has a mind of her own to decide herself!" Ron hissed back, meeting Harry's glare.

"I will not let a loser like *you* touch her! You here me?! You think I don't know what kind of person you are, Weasley?! You're not going anywhere *near* AJ while *I'm* still alive!" Harry hissed in return, his eyes slowly narrowing into slits and his hand slowly reaching for his wand in his robe pocket.

"Harry, would you quit it?! I—"

"She's going with *me*, Weasley!" Draco burst out angrily as he could barely keep himself from lunging at the redhead, his eyes smoldering in anger and jealousy.

AJ suddenly snapped her head up to look at him in shock, her eyes blazing in anger. "What did you say, Malfoy? Going with *you*, now is it?! Now kindly tell me when we made this so-called arrangement that *I* don't even know about?!" She asked in a low, furious hiss, her eyes wide and disbelieving.

Draco suddenly flushed in humiliation before composing himself reaching forward to grasp AJ's hand tightly in his, looking into her eyes.

“I.. I’m sorry... I...What I meant was... Well... Would you go to the Yule Ball with *me*, AJ? Would you grant me the pleasure of being *my* partner, for the evening?” He asked as AJ felt his hand tremble nervously in hers.

“Malfoy, I mean...*Draco*, I don’t know...I thought, I didn’t—” She stopped, her eyes clouding over as she turned away, refusing to meet his eyes and feeling her heart pounding painfully against her chest that she was almost certain they could hear it too.

Somehow, she couldn’t find the right words to properly express the wave of emotions flooding through her at that very moment but surprisingly, Draco looked as though he seemed to understand, merely squeezing her hand in response. “I know...” He whispered, lifting her hand and placing a gentle kiss onto her palm.

Draco gave her a gentle smile, raising a hand to stroke her cheek as she felt them flush underneath his fingers, bolts of electricity racing through her skin where he had touched her.

Eyes suddenly glazed over, Draco began to lean forward, causing her to tense even more as she pulled away abruptly from him, refusing to meet Draco’s crushed look of surprise and rejection.

For a moment, Harry saw the look in his twin’s eyes, his eyes widening in shock as she turned away from his best friend, moving away from everyone else in the table and causing a couple other Slytherins to look at her curiously.

But what surprised him even more was instead of feeling anger and fury at Draco, his also secretly felt understanding as he saw the pained look on Draco’s face. *What the is wrong with me?? Now I understand other people’s bloody emotions too?!* He thought angrily to himself.

“Potter, you’re not thinking of going with this ferret, are you?!” Ron raged angrily, causing Harry to snap his glare back to him again, growling in fury. AJ’s eyes had begun to fill up with tears of frustration and confusion as she stared at both Draco and Ron, still backing away silently from the table.

“Look.. You both just *please* stay the *fuck* away from me... I—”

“But, Potter, who are you—”

“I’m not going with either of you, okay?! Someone already asked me to the Ball!” She screamed angrily, interrupting Ron’s rant again as he jumped slightly in surprise at her sudden outburst, finally noticing her growing frustration.

Harry watched as two different reactions took place... Weasley’s face had gone red in anger and humiliation while Draco’s had just twisted in pain and hurt again, hiding it with a hostile sneer of anger but Harry knew him well enough to see right through it.

He had already seen it... He had seen the look on Draco’s face... And it revealed to him enough for his eyes to harden in anger and resentment, his features forming into a scowl. *He loves her...* He realized, the words barely registering themselves in his head.

*No way... I’m not about to lose my only sister to my best friend...I’m not about to let her go...She’s all I have left and Draco isn’t about to take her love away from me...Neither is Weasley...* Harry thought as he glared back at his best friend in threat, feeling a strange panic and anger fill him.

“Both of you stay the fuck away from her!” Harry suddenly snapped, causing both boys to jump as his eyes flashed dangerously, not noticing AJ’s confused face.

“Who—” Ron didn’t get to finish as Harry glared sharply at him to shut up again before AJ finally exploded, looking at him with furious, cold eyes.

“That’s none of your fucking business, Weasley!” AJ snapped angrily again before she whirled and stalked out of the Great Hall, angry tears now cascading down her pale cheeks.

Ron just stared after her, his jaw hanging open while Harry looked up and briefly met Hermione’s gaze at him from across the room, her eyes unreadable before he stormed after his sister, leaving the room.

“AJ—” Draco choked out as he attempted to go after her but Blaise held him back, shaking his head at him.

“Let her go, Draco...” He said silently as he watched, for the first time in his life, *Draco Malfoy’s* face cloud over in heart wrenching sadness, his silver eyes suddenly dull and lifeless as he stared after the twins’ hasty exit, his face reflecting pure love and longing.

Ron snapped out his stupor and walked back to the Gryffindor table, glowering in anger and humiliation as Draco shook his head hastily to hide his emotions again, both boys finally noticing that most of the students *and* teachers in the hall, were now staring at them.

Feeling his pent-up anger and fury explode inside him, his eyes suddenly blazed back to life as he glared at everyone who was staring.

“What the fuck are you all staring at?! The show is over! Sod off!” He yelled furiously at them before he sank back down in his seat, ignoring the shocked stares of his housemates as he dropped his face in his hands.

“Hey Hermione!” Fred exclaimed as the Great Hall resumed back to its usual stupor, the Gryffindors carrying on carelessly as if nothing had happened as most of the girls had even sniggered as “the Slytherin princess”, had stormed out of the room in tears.

Hermione however, had surprised herself when she felt pity and understanding for her Slytherin rival when she saw the girl begin to break down, reminding Hermione once again of how Harry had looked himself when he had broken down in front of her in frustration.

*Seems ‘frustration’ is one of the Potters’ weakness...That and relationships...* She thought, sighing.

Frankly, she hadn’t been surprised when Ron had asked AJ out to the Yule Ball, it’s obvious the whole third *and* fourth year that her best friend fancied her rival and she had absolutely no problem with the idea when she herself fancied Harry...

But... When she had seen the heartbroken, longing look that Malfoy seemed to have given AJ... She had to admit that it had *not* compared at all to her best friend's little *crush* on her...

Malfoy's look was actually one fueled with... with *love*... She had seen it before... It was the way *she* herself looked at Harry when Harry refused to acknowledge her or pretended not to notice... And as unbelievable and disgusting it was for her to ever imagine that Malfoy actually had *feelings*, she knew he was serious about her. She understood the feeling of loving someone who was just too dense to realize it... Too dense and thick to return the feeling... Too *scared*...

*Looks like Malfoy and I made the same mistake of falling in love with a Potter...* Hermione thought sadly as she saw Draco's similar miserable look of sadness across the room.

Harry and AJ were much more similar than everyone else thought... But... The way Harry had gone after his sister like that... Hermione hated to admit it but it had made her heart melt...

Despite everything he does, he always had such a soft spot for his twin... It was kind of sweet in a way... *If only he could feel the same about me...* Hermione thought sadly as she looked up just Fred Weasley plopped down beside her, giving her a cheerful grin.

"Quite a scene huh? Rather entertaining if I do say so myself." He commented, chomping on an apple casually.

Hermione glared back coldly at him, not amused by his antics. "It *shouldn't* have been entertaining Fred... From what I could see, AJ looked really upset." She pointed out.

Fred shrugged carelessly, giving her another grin. "She deserved it... She was such a—"

"You know, maybe you could understand her somehow! Ron put her into such a compromising situation! Maybe—"

"Hey! I didn't do anything, Hermione! It was that little ferret, Malfoy! He shouldn't have butted in the first place! Now he's ruined everything!" Ron interrupted her, glaring at her in anger.

“Ron, it wasn’t entirely his fault you know.” Hermione answered calmly, annoyed at his childishness.

“Yes it was! I was handling myself just fine when *he* had the nerve to ask Potter to the Yule Ball! He should know that no girl would have the right mind to go with *him!*” Ron ranted, scowling.

Lavender looked up from across the table, giving him a pointed look. “Actually Ron... If you haven’t noticed, Malfoy’s one of the hottest boys in school, girls would *kill* to go to the Ball with him.” She pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

Ron snorted in disgust, refusing to acknowledge her comment as he just slumped in his seat, scowling in anger.

“*I* would.” Lavender continued, turning to check out Malfoy across the room, who was picking at his plate silently, not even noticing the now increased, interested glances the other girls were throwing at him after AJ had refused his invitation.

Ron instantly glanced back up, his eyes blazing as he heard Lavender’s words before he briefly muttered something under his breath, turning away to hide an unreadable look in his eyes.

Hermione just rolled her eyes at the girl, shaking her head as she turned back to pick at her own plate, barely even hearing what was going on around her.

“Well... I suppose I could always ask someone else as long as she isn’t a troll... Who are you going with Seamus?” Ron suddenly asked the boy beside him, giving him a curious glance.

Seamus looked up from eating his roast chicken, swallowing for a minute before he answered. “I’m not sure yet Ron but I’m thinking of asking that cute Ravenclaw Mandy Brocklehurst...” He answered, shrugging flippantly.

Ron raised a curious eyebrow, frowning. “Who do you reckon *I* should ask?” He asked out loud, his eyes clouding over in thought as they involuntarily began traveling over to linger on Lavender yet again.

“What about Hermione over there?” Seamus pointed out, winking at Hermione before turning back to his lunch, waiting for her reaction.

Ron and Hermione both colored immediately, Hermione shaking her head in a hasty, manner. Ron looked at Seamus as though he had grown an extra head, rolling his eyes in irritation.

“Seamus, Hermione is like a sister to me...Besides... I think I’m going to try and push my luck with that veela-girl, Fleur.” He said, turning to look at the girl at the Ravenclaw table.

Seamus snorted derisively, shaking his head. “You’re in way over your head, Ronnie-boy... That girl is three years older than you and is probably being fought for already.” He pointed out, shaking his head.

Ron’s ears turned red in embarrassment as he glared at his best friend, not saying anything with Fred watching the two in growing amusement. “Look, whatever you two, I just came here to ask Hermione something.” Fred said, shaking his head at them as he turned and gave Hermione a smile.

*Oh no...*Hermione thought as she looked up from her untouched dinner plate and eyed him warily, already predicting the question that was about to come out of his mouth.

“Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?”

Ron gaped openly at his brother, clearly not happy with the idea of his older brother asking his best friend out but he relaxed when he saw the hesitant look on Hermione’s face.

Hermione held back a groan, sighing. At first, she had to admit that she had been flattered by all the invites she hadn’t expected to receive but frankly, she only wanted *one* person to invite her... Though he seemed to be the only one who isn’t asking...

“Fred... I’m flattered and all that but... I.. Well—”

Fred laughed good-naturedly, instantly shaking his head and shrugging at her to show that he was okay with it. “Hey, it’s okay Hermione, I can’t take a hint. A guy can hope, can’t he?” He quipped,

offering her a flirtatious wink before he turned and faced Ron, raising his eyebrows.

“Oh, and Ronnie-boy, just to tell you, we borrowed Pig last night okay? We sent him off to deliver a letter.” Fred mentioned cheerfully, giving Ron a grin.

Ron rolled his eyes at the mention of his owl, Pigwidgeon, which he had found at the end of their third year when the owl had flown into their compartment on the Hogwarts express going home, immediately settling itself onto Ron’s shoulders.

“What for? Who do you and George keep writing to anyway?” Ron asked suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at his brother.

“Oh, butt out, Ronnie-boy, it’s none of your business.” Fred replied jovially, grinning and giving Hermione another suggestive wink again before heading back towards his seventh-year friends, still grinning.

“Will everyone *quit* calling me *Ronnie-boy*?!” Ron burst out, turning red in irritation.

Hermione couldn’t help laugh at Fred’s flirtatiousness and Ron’s immature behavior as she turned back to her dinner, listening to Seamus rant on and on about whom he was planning to ask and failing to notice that Parvati was still glaring across the table at her, an evil smirk on her face.

“Hey, Lav, will you excuse me for a second, I have to do something.” She said sweetly to her best friend as she got up from the table, giving the girl an innocent smile.

“What are you going to do?” Lavender asked, fusing her eyebrows at her warily.

Parvati just gave her a smug smile, flipping her hair over her shoulder in response. “Making sure the boy I want asks me out to the Yule Ball.” She answered sweetly before heading out of the Great Hall.

Lavender stared after her, shrugging before she turned back to talk to Ginny, who was right beside her.



Just as Parvati made her way down a long trail of corridors, she stopped at an empty classroom where a tall, familiar boy was waiting impatiently on one of the empty seats, standing up immediately when he saw her enter.

“Viktor Krum? Hi, I’m Parvati Patil.” She greeted as she coyly checked him out from head to toe, noting that though *Bulgarian*, the boy was a looker. *Though not as handsome as my Harry...* She thought smugly to herself, shrugging.

“Parvati Patil? Vat is dis all about?” Krum demanded as they shook hands, narrowing his eyes at her in suspicion.

“Well, first off, thank you for coming and reading my note to you... I believe I may know a juicy piece of information that I know you’d like.” She offered, raising an eyebrow as Krum glared at her in disbelief.

Parvati returned his suspicious glare with a sweet, innocent smile as she sat down on one of the empty chairs, crossing her legs gingerly for effect. “Why the hostility, Viktor? May I call you that?” She asked, batting her eyelashes at him with a smirk.

Krum’s eyes narrowed even more but he nodded, still slightly suspicious as he sat down cautiously. “Vat do you vant?” He asked, arching an eyebrow in obvious irritation and impatience as he checked his watch again.

Parvati flashed him her smile, showing her perfectly white, gleaming teeth as she secretly tried to prevent herself from lashing out in irritation at the rudeness of the boy in front of her.

“I’m here to tell *you* something, Viktor, which I think is related to what *you* want. You *do* know what I’m talking about, right?” She asked, raising an eyebrow back at him as the Bulgarian seeker shook his head in confusion.

Parvati gave him a look of irritation before she gritted her teeth, taking a deep breath before smiling once again and continuing. “Well... I happen to know.. From a *very* reliable source of course... That you have taken a fancy to one of my housemates, Hermione Granger.” She said, winking at him.

Krum flushed a dark red, muttering in embarrassment. "Y-you know Hermy-own?" He stuttered, his eyes wide and nervous.

Parvati held back a giggle at his mispronunciation of Hermione's name but refused to point it out as she just smiled at him in response. "Of *course* I know Hermione! She and I are like the *best* of friends!" She lied, fighting back a sarcastic sneer at the idea.

*More like the best of enemies now...* She thought, her eyes narrowing darkly for a moment as she fought back another mocking scowl. "Oh I see... Vell, vat do you vant to tell me?" He asked again, still blushing.

Parvati giggled before leaning over and grinning knowingly at him, feeling a surge of satisfaction well up inside her when the boy tensed in uneasiness and leaned back slightly in intimidation.

"Well... I just *hope* you're planning on asking dear *Hermi* to the Yule Ball, Viktor... You see, she tells *me* she's just *dying* to go with you." She told him, raising her eyebrows in what she hoped was a convincing look.

Krum looked more confused than ever as he stared at her, raising his eyebrow in doubt and surprise at her statement. "She *does*? But... From vat I have always seen and from the looks she throws at me... I thought she vas not interested." He mused out loud.

Parvati waved it off, laughing as she shook her head vigorously at him, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Of course not, Viktor! She's absolutely *crazy* about you! She told me that if you *did* ask her to the Yule Ball, she would accept immediately! Believe me, she tells *me* everything!" Parvati exclaimed in fake enthusiasm, trying not to snort at the last line.

Krum looked genuinely surprised as a warm blush rose to his cheeks, a slow smile spreading across his face. "I see.... Vell... Vat do you think I should do about it?" He asked, a sincere smile on his face.

"Ask her out *immediately*, Viktor. Before anyone else does and she accepts... She's just *waiting* for you to come up to her." Parvati told him, nodding excitedly.

Krum made a move to get up but Parvati held a hand up to stop him, shaking her head at his sudden hastiness.

“Wait... Not now... She’s just... Uh.... Well—” Parvati desperately tried to think of something to say.

“She just had this huge problem so she won’t be able to handle *that*...Leave it to me... *I’ll* tell you when to ask her...” Parvati told him, smiling.

*I feel as though my face is going to crack from all the smiling...*She thought in irritation, fighting back a sigh of exasperation.

Krum could do nothing else but smile back, nodding in agreement. “Thank you but... Why are you helping me? Us?” He asked curiously, fusing his thick eyebrows together.

Parvati held back a snarl as she forced herself to smile sincerely at Krum again, secretly cursing him inside her head. “Because... As I said, Hermione’s my...*friend*, and I want to see her happy... And I know that you’d make her happy...You’d make any girl happy.” She added seductively, giving him a sexy smile.

*You’d definitely make ‘me’ happy once you help me get Granger out of the picture and help me get Harry!* She added smugly.

Krum flushed crimson at this, his eyes widening slightly in surprise at the compliment she had just given him. “Oh... Vell, thank you very much, Parvati... I appreciate all your help, but I had better get going now... I shall wait for your signal.” He said, nodding his thanks

Parvati nodded back, fake, sweet smile back in place, gingerly waving to him as he slowly walked out of the room, giving her one last grateful smile before shutting the door.

As soon as the door had shut, Parvati’s smile had instantly turned into a hateful, smug scowl, allowing a smirk as she licked her lips in anticipation. “Well...It won’t be long now...” She said out loud to herself before she grinned in self-satisfaction, finally jumping up from her seat and heading back towards Gryffindor towers, the huge, pleased smile never leaving her face.

“*Trolls?! Honestly you two! Your partner for the Yule Ball doesn't necessarily have to be someone good-looking! You both are so insensitive sometimes!*”

Parvati smirked as she recognized the voice behind her, stopping dead in her tracks as she waited for their footsteps to come closer. *Ah... Hermione... Just in time...* She thought in delight before whirling around and heading for the girl she had grown to hate.

**A/N:** Argh!! Don't kill me!! ducks as everyone yells hexes and curses at her I'm *really* sorry for the cliffhanger but I just couldn't resist... giggle Besides, you all forgive me don't you? puts on a pouty face but ducks again to avoid the Cruciatus curse Uh-oh... guess not... sheepish smile And grrr!! Stupid AJ too!! Stupid, stupid AJ!! whacks AJ over the head with Harry's firebolt Stupid twins! Stupid twins! Stupid, stupid! Stupid AJ for hurting Draco! whacks AJ Stupid Harry for hurting Hermione! whacks Harry **STUPID!** Hehe... Phew... takes a deep breath Now that I've got that out f my system, I can calm down... smirk Before I go, I have one last thing to say... Yup, you guessed it... grin **PLEASE REVIEW EVERYONE!! Hehe... Luvyah all! Ciao!**

## Chapter 20- Cold as Ice

“AJ!”

AJ didn't turn back as she furiously began running faster, tears streaming down her face as she rounded the corner and headed straight for the only place she knew she could calm down— the Hogwarts gardens.

“AJ, please!”

Recognizing her twin brother's voice instantly, she had only run faster, deciding inwardly that she would not be able to face him at the moment with all the secrets she had been keeping from him these past few days.

*How the fuck could this all happen?!* She thought furiously as she forced herself to run faster, not bothering to apologize to the numerous students she had crashed into the corridor as she tried to distance herself away from her brother, though she knew it was a difficult task to do.

*That's what I get for having an athletic Slytherin seeker for a brother...* She thought bitterly as she dashed faster, her leg muscles beginning to ache terribly from all the forced exertion she was forcing onto them at the moment.

She didn't know it was possible... Possible to take an already complex problem she had been dealing with and then screw it up even more... Only *she* could make her situation worse...

*What the hell was I thinking agreeing to go with Cedric?!* AJ cursed herself silently, sobbing out loud now as she remembered both Draco and Ron's crushed faces... The sight of seeing them both looking so rejected at the same time was almost too much for her to handle...

*I'm such a stupid fool... I messed things up even more...Nice going Potter...* She yelled inwardly at herself, tears of frustration welling up inside her again as she finally heard Harry's footsteps fade away from her hearing.

Sighing, she slowed down against a clearing surrounded by rose bushes and let herself collapse onto the soft, green grass, finally letting it all out as she buried her head in her arms and began crying softly.

She had messed up... Big time... *It's all my fault... If I wasn't so bloody messed up right now... If only I could understand myself... But I can't... I haven't even experienced any of this before...* She thought as her heart-wrenching sobs pierced through the silence of the garden that anyone who would have heard would have felt sorry for the poor girl.

But it was true... She had never experienced any of this before... She didn't want to blame anyone else but since Harry had never exposed her to these feelings in the first place, she never figured out how to handle them....

She wasn't experienced like he was... She wasn't the type of person who could easily turn down someone else just with a snap of her fingers... Contrary to what other people believe about her, she didn't like hurting anyone if she could help it...

She was the complete opposite of Harry inside... She didn't enjoy rejecting anyone harshly or using other people just to satisfy her own needs or desires... She wore a mask.... A thick, big, ugly mask of hatred just like every other Slytherin did...

But she never went over hurting by words... She could use words to hurt other people but she certainly could never find it in her heart to be the one to intentionally hurt them without feeling an immense, piercing emotion of guilt overwhelm her and keep her up at nights...

And the fact that both Draco and Ron had put her into such a spot like that... She didn't know how to react at all... Any other girl would have been flattered of course but since AJ never really was used to that kind of emotion expressed to her so publicly, she didn't know how she should respond...

In the past, she had always allowed Harry to tell off and threaten the guys asking her out before but this was different... She knew she had

to handle this by herself... She knew she couldn't let Harry handle this...

She could have never decided right then and there... Looking into both Draco's beautiful, intense silver orbs and into Ron's bright, expressive blue ones... She didn't like it... She didn't like it at all... It was like being put naked as a glass specimen under a microscope and only *she* didn't know why she was there...

But the most painful part was... For once in her life... For that exact moment... She had actually felt *cheap*... Like she was some prized trophy or special prize that both Draco and Ron were trying to win over the other... It was at that very moment that she couldn't tell at all who was actually being sincere about his feelings and who was actually just toying with her or just asking her out to show her off...

She hated it... She wasn't some prize to be won... She was an actual person and she wanted someone to want *her* because he actually *respected* her... *admired* her... *needed* her but most of all, she wanted someone to want her because he *loved* her... Not because he wanted her just as some doll to brag off to everyone...

She wanted someone to *need* her because he just plainly wanted to be with her... That's all she ever wanted... She wasn't asking for anyone drop-dead gorgeous or she wasn't asking for another Gilderoy Lockhart but she just wanted someone to love her...

For *her*... *Not* for her reputation or her popularity.... Not for her looks... Most definitely not because she was related to the great Harry Potter and most of all, not for just a good time... She wanted a *long term* commitment and someone who would actually stay with her, regardless of the 'sleeping together' factor...

*Yeah right... Like I would ever find a guy at Hogwarts who actually has those qualities...* She thought bitterly, angrily wiping her tears away as she lay back down on the grass and stared up at the sky, admiring the beauty of it for a brief moment.

*But then... There had been that look on Draco's face...* She thought, her eyes filling up again as she remembered how crushed and how

hurt he had looked at that moment when she had pulled away from him.

She didn't want to tell anyone about it but it had scared her off... *Why* had he reacted like that... But... It... It had also *pained* her as well...

It had been the first time she had ever seen his eyes cloud over into lifeless, gray orbs like that... Ever since they had met, Draco's eyes had always seemed so beautiful, sparkling with mischief and a hint of naughtiness that had always brought a smile to her face.

They were always a bright, dazzling silver... Compared to Harry's eyes—cold, masked and hard... Draco's eyes were much more expressive... Compared to Harry's that is... They always seemed to be guarded as well but somehow, she did notice that whenever Draco's eyes would meet hers... His guard would somehow drop momentarily and she could actually see past him into that beautiful, endless pool of silver...

It was always sparkling with something she could explain... Something so captivating and alluring that she found herself lost in their depths for a long time before she could actually gather enough courage to look away, dazed and unfocused...

But... What she had seen earlier... They had hardened like rocks and had become cold and lifeless... Like she had really hurt him deep and she couldn't bear the thought of that... If she had to hurt anyone right now... She had never wanted it to be Draco...

She didn't know what she felt for him... It was a feeling that had intensified, ever since their second year actually... When they had first started out, Draco had been nothing more but an annoying, self-centered prat to her, which was the reason why they had always argued in the past....and until now actually...

But over the years... Somehow, he had matured and the annoying prick he was to her before was gone and in his place was an affectionate, caring and... She hated to admit it... *charming and sexy* boy who seemed to make her pulse quicken at the mere sight of him....



*I wonder who would believe me when I tell them that Draco Malfoy was affectionate and caring...* She thought, managing a weak laugh at the ridiculous idea.

Sure... They still argued at times... Okay, they still argued *most* of the time but when the situation really called for it, Draco had a side that showed her exactly how much he truly cared for her regardless of the spiteful things they've said to one another. Perhaps... Fighting was just one of their ways to hide the way they really felt towards one another...

Draco never really did show his sensitive side to other people outside their house... Hell, he didn't even like showing that side to the other members of Slytherin except for Harry and AJ but the twins respected him enough not to tell anyone else about it...

*How can I like him if he's so vain and self-centered??* AJ wondered idly, remembering just how cruel and heartless Draco had been before as well when he had dumped all those other girls he had dated in the past.

And as much as she tried to deny it, he was easily a heartless jerk... A snob, according to what other people said as well... If she would compare his horrible, insufferable personality to that of Ron's Gryffindor nobility and bravery, she could easily pick Ron out as the winner any day...

She couldn't understand herself... Now that she had finally gotten the boy of her dreams to actually ask her out... Gryffindor Ron Weasley... Whose qualities are probably the exact opposite of Draco's, she goes straying into the blonde Slytherin's arms...

*What's to like about him anyway?? He's rude... He's conceited... Self-absorbed... Insensitive... Obnoxious... I mean, why go for the gorgeous jerk when she could have the cute, friendly boy next door?* She thought incredulously.

She couldn't understand what she could possibly find in Draco that made her feel this way about him... He wasn't her type at all... She wasn't all out for the dangerous, bad boy kind... She felt safer with

someone more predictable and less intense... She couldn't understand why she should actually choose him...

Despite this, however, she couldn't deny it... She knew Draco would never change his personality... No matter *how* or *what* he felt about her... But... Surprisingly enough, she didn't know why she could still have such feelings for him knowing this...

*He may look like a prince charming but he's definitively no noble hero out to save the day and the people and become everyone's fucking best friend, that's for damn sure...* She thought in weak amusement, sighing out loud.

But still... She didn't know why but she actually... She actually loved every single thing about the handsome Slytherin and even if it were up to her... She wouldn't do a damn thing to change him... That was the reason she felt like this towards him in the first place... Because he was... Well... *Draco*... She thought, her lips quirking into a shaky smile.

*Merlin's beard, I sound like a lovesick idiot...* She thought to herself in disgust, shaking her head at herself.

*Oh crap... I can't believe this... Why didn't I see it all along, dammit?? Why the was I so stuck up on my silly, childish infatuation with Ron when the answer is just under my nose, dammit!!* She thought, her eyes widening as she realized the answer to why she felt like this, but instead of feeling relieved, it saddened her even more, a heavy feeling suddenly in her chest.

*I... Dammit... I...I should have known I can't choose the person I fall for...I can't choose for my bloody heart and that piece of crap is telling me that... Dammit! I'm falling for him! I'm falling for my brother's best friend! I'm falling for Draco!* She thought in shock, her eyes widening even more and her heart stopping for a split second as she clenched her hands tightly in pain.

*No... No please... I cannot believe this is happening... It wasn't supposed to like this... I can't be with him, I can't... No... Never... Please, never... I... just can't... I... I'm fucking scared of him, I can't... He... Being with him is just so unpredictable and he has the*

*power to control me, I can't...* She thought in panic as she furiously scowled up at the sky, wiping her swollen eyes once again.

*But... Draco... He's just... I... I actually... I want him, I—*

"AJ, what are you doing out here?" A familiar voice asked softly, breaking abruptly through her deep thoughts as AJ heard a soft crunching of leaves behind her, causing her to gasp in surprise and whirl around immediately, her wand outstretched in front of her and her eyes wide in alarm.

The slightly amused smile of her twin stared back at her from where he stood a couple of feet from her, arms crossed over his chest and eyebrow raised curiously at her jumpy reaction.

AJ sighed in relief, slowly tucking her wand back into her robe pocket as Harry settled himself beside her, saying nothing at all as they both lay back down on the grass and stared at the sky, listening to each other's breathing. After a long, relaxing moment of silence, Harry turned over so that his face was meeting hers, gently tucking a stray strand of her long hair behind her ear to expose the famous scar on her forehead.

"Are you okay?" He asked quietly, his emerald-green eyes glinting in concern for a moment as she stared back at his familiar features. She bit her lip as tears began to fill her eyes up again at the gentle tone of his voice but she held them back, not wanting to cry anymore.

"I-I'm fine... Harry, I—I'm just... I just wanted to get away from everything for a while..." She answered shakily, turning away so her brother couldn't see her weak side again, disgusted and ashamed of herself for being so pathetic compared to him.

Harry nodded, not saying anything as he wrapped both his arms around his twin, pulling her into a comforting hug as she trembled against him but let herself relax in his familiar embrace, sighing softly.

"Harry... Harry I'm sorry..." She whispered quietly, shutting her eyes to prevent the tears again, feeling her frustration grow when she heard the shaky cracking of her voice.

“For what?” He asked, looking at her intently with a serious expression on his face.

AJ opened her eyes and stared back at him for a whole minute before she turned and stared up at the sky, ashamed once more of the strength she saw in her brother’s eyes and the weakness she felt in her own.

“For being so damn pathetic... For being such a weak crybaby... It’s no wonder you call me a *baby* sister... It’s no wonder everyone else says I’m helpless... Because I am... You must be ashamed of me...” She said softly, not bothering to look him in the eye.

Harry looked at her as though she was crazy, his eyes widening slightly in mock-laughter and a light, amused laugh escaping his smirking mouth. “Weak?! AJ, what are you talking about? You’re not weak and helpless, you’re a strong person. You’re just—”

“Harry, for once would you take me seriously for a minute?! And what were you going to say? That I’m *delicate*?! Delicate... *Dammit*, Harry! I’m not strong! If I was strong, I would have handled that scene back there without running away! If I was so damn strong then I wouldn’t have messed things up than they already were before!” She snapped instantly, glaring at him.

“I *am* taking you seriously, AJ... And if you ask me, both Weasley and Draco were asking for it for putting you into such a ridiculous situation like that in the first place since you’re too damn young—”

“I’m not too damn *young* Harry! I’m only *five minutes younger than you*! You know, that’s the reason I’m so weak! That’s why everyone thinks I’m so damn weak and helpless, Harry! Because that’s exactly how you portray me to be!! You make me feel so pathetic in front of everyone else! You act as if you’re my *father*, not my twin brother! Would you for once let me handle my own *fucking* life on my *own*?!” She exploded, bolting up from the ground and screaming at him in pure, unadulterated anger.

Harry’s eyes flashed dangerously now as he stood up as well, glaring at her in unrelenting hatred and fury as he took in the meaning of her

harsh words, both of them finally unleashing the frustration they had been welling up inside at the other.

“Stop interrupting me AJ.... And you want to handle your own life on your own?! Well, then I’d be glad to let you, *Ms. Perfect!* That’s really what this is about isn’t it? You’re the level-headed twin, you’re the intelligent, responsible one, you’re the one everyone seems to regard as someone worth calling a *hero*, *aren’t* you? Well, fine then! Run your own damn godforsaken life! See if I fucking care! See if you can handle your own damn life on your own without screwing it up just like you did, back there!” Harry burst out, his eyes glinting dangerously at her.

AJ glared at him through a wild, tangled mane of hair, her face twisting into a snarl and her eyes flashing like lightning bolts in a raging storm, something Harry rarely saw in her at all.

“The reason I can’t handle my own damn life, Harry, is because of *you!* All because of *you!* You made me this way! You treated me like a damn baby all my life and now, I’m paying for it! I don’t know how to handle my emotions, my feelings, because you never let me face them by myself! You have no right to do that Harry; this is my own *fucking* life! For once, let me have it back now and handle your own screwed life rather than controlling mine!” She screamed again, her throat aching but she didn’t care, releasing all her pent-up anger at her twin in front of her.

Harry just sneered back coldly at her, the simple action cutting through her like a sharp, poisonous knife and striking her deep within her gut, causing her to back down in shock and hurt as Harry’s glare seemed to penetrate right through her.

“Oh yeah, forgive me, Ms. I-don’t-make-mistakes... I forgot, *your* life isn’t screwed... *Your* life is so goddamn flawless and peaceful because you know what? You aren’t me. And because I took so bloody damn good care in helping you and now—”

“I never said I didn’t make mistakes, Harry!! My life right now is just as screwed as yours! You have no right to say that to me at all! And if you’re taking so damn good care of *my* life, then pray tell, why—”

“Don’t you interrupt me, AJ! Don’t you *fucking* interrupt me when I’m talking to you! Don’t you fucking *dare*!!” Harry yelled back angrily, violently slamming his fist against a tree trunk, not at all caring to heal the blood that was rapidly streaming out of his fist.

AJ jumped at this, breathing very heavily and not bothering to prevent the hastily flowing tears as they cascaded freely down her cheeks, her whole form trembling and shaking in frustration.

Harry turned to look back at her, his own body trembling with harsh sobs and his own years furiously forming in his eyes and cascading down his cheeks... Tears of frustration and anger... Tears of unreleased emotion he had been holding in for a long time now but had refused to let out...

“If *your* life is screwed up right now AJ... Then you have absolutely no *fucking* idea how it is compared to mine... You have no right to blame your own personal problems and frustrations out on me when you’re the one who’s been making your own fucked-up mistakes in the first place... And you have absolutely *no* idea how *my* life is...” Harry said calmly, breathing very heavily as he tried to calm himself down, staring intently at the ground.

“Oh yeah?! Then how *is* your life now Harry?! Care to tell me, *champion*?! Then maybe I might actually feel sorry for you because at the moment, I don’t know if you’ve cared to notice, because of your so-called handling, my own life seems to be messed up thanks to you!! You’ve never let me handle anything by myself and now, look where that got me!” She screamed at him again, her throat raw and painful.

“I never did anything to ruin *your* life, AJ! You ruined it your own damn self! See?? I leave you alone for a good couple of days and you screw it up already? You know what, you really are pathetic aren’t you?! You’re as weak and as helpless as they all say you are! For once, I agree with them! You’re *nothing*!” Harry bellowed at her, now trembling in anger.

AJ stopped for a minute and paled, her face turning a sickly shade of ashen at his harsh words but she stepped forward again, eyes dark with anger as she found her shaky voice to speak.

"I may be nothing, Harry, but at least I accept my mistakes. I accept my weaknesses. Can you say the same about yourself? The thing is Harry, before you start pointing out *my* mistakes and start trying to correct and improve *my own fucking life*, maybe you should work on your own first... We may be twins but you have no right to control me! I don't need your protection! Hell, look at me, I'm even going with Cedric Diggory to the Yule Ball and—"

"*What?! What* did you say?!" Harry hissed, interrupting her train of thought as he grabbed her hands and held them roughly, tightening his grip on them in an attempt to squelch his growing anger at her words.

AJ's eyes widened as she realized what she had just said, causing her gulp slightly and to stutter her answer out at Harry's enraged features. "I—I... You heard me... I... Cedric asked me to the Yule Ball today... And... And I said yes..." She answered calmly, trying not to flinch as Harry immediately flung her hands away, his eyes blazing in absolute hatred.

"You *what?! Is this another one of your screw-ups?! Are you stupid or something?! Diggory is mydamn rival* at the tournament *and* he's a Hufflepuff! What is everyone going to say when they find out that my bloody *sister* is going with my fucking *rival?!?*" Harry raged at her, furiously running a hand through his hair as he turned wild, angry eyes at his twin.

"Oh for once, would you care about anything rather than your reputation, Harry?! Who gives a crap about what other people would think anyway?! And I'm not stupid! Cedric is my friend! You can't tell me who I can and cannot go out with, I get to decide for my own self! I'm—"

"*AJ, SHUT THE FUCK UP!!*" Harry screamed at her, causing her to jump in surprise again and turn wide, frightened eyes at her brother, not at all liking the way his emerald eyes were glowing in undeniable rage, glowing like hateful orbs of light in the darkness.

*Never... In my entire life... Has Harry ever shouted at me like that...* She thought immediately, feeling her heart clench painfully as

she felt about a hundred nerve-wracking sobs threaten to escape her trembling body.

Harry turned his wild, maniacal eyes to hers again, a hideous snarl on his features, not at all looking like the calm, loving twin she knew but instead, looking at her just as everyone saw him—the cold, heartless Slytherin that cared about no one else but himself.

And for once in her life.... She was scared... She was actually scared of him... Scared of angering him even more...

AJ bit back another sob as she relented and reached out for him, trying to wrap her arms around him in an embrace but Harry shoved her off roughly, his cold, hard eyes dark and unforgiving.

“First...I find out... That there’s a fucking possibility of my own twin sister leaving me for my best friend... And now... I find out, that my twin sister is abandoning me for my rival!” Harry shouted, his eyes filling with tears once more.

“Abandoning you—?! Harry! You don’t know what you’re saying! You’re my brother! No matter what happens, you will always have me as your sister and I will always love you no matter who I—”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, AJ?! I gave you everything! All I wanted was your support and loyalty through all this but you go and meddle behind my back! If you don’t want me to help you in your life, *fucking hell*, AJ, if you don’t want to me to even *be* in your life, then just tell me! It’s not like I was the one who chose myself to be your brother anyway!!” Harry exploded again, shoving her away violently, causing AJ to cry out and fall painfully back to the ground, wincing in pain, not from the fall but from the harsh words her twin had dared to direct at her.

AJ stared up at him in shock, now crying openly as Harry met her gaze in equally shocked, disbelieving eyes, both not daring to believe that Harry had actually hurt her physically. *Oh my god...He shoved me away... He actually pushed me... He... He’s never done that before... He...* AJ thought as she watched about a hundred emotions overcome Harry’s face, looking as though he was having an inner battle about how to react at shoving his twin.



"I...I—I'm sorry... I didn't mean to... I—I..." Harry didn't bother finishing his stiff, tense sentence as his eyes flashed coldly once more and he turned around abruptly from the heart-wrenching sight of seeing his twin sprawled painfully on the ground.

"Fine... Have it your own damn way... I won't meddle in your life... Go with Diggory... See if I care... .." Harry finished coldly, yet calmly, his voice harsh and emotionless before he stalked off back towards the castle, leaving his sister a crying, rumpled mess on the ground.

"H-Harry... Please come back... I can't lose you... I—I'm sorry... I..." AJ stuttered weakly but Harry was already off, not bothering to look back as he refused to let the tears welling up in his eyes fall, forcing himself to harden.

AJ didn't have the strength to go after him, crying uncontrollably, her piercing, anguished sobs heard throughout the entire quiet garden as she visibly shook in grief, wrapping her arms around her frail form to warm herself as she lay there, unwilling to move from the spot he had shoved her into.

"I—I'm sorry..." She whispered again, her delicate, normally bright features crumpling into pure misery as she buried her head in her arms and sobbed her entire self out, not at all caring if anyone heard her.

*Harry please... If this was my fault for agreeing to go with Cedric... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I can lose everyone else, every other boy out there but please not 'you'...* AJ thought, the silence and emptiness of the air mocking her.

Parvati let her lips secretly curve upwards into a self-satisfied smirk as she headed for the Gryffindor trio ahead of her before instantly turning her smirk into a wince of pain, forcing a look of absolute heartbreak to form on her face. Rushing forwards towards them, she immediately pretended to start crying and sobbing hysterically, burying her face in her hands and whimpering out loud as she passed them.

*Granger will take the bait... She never fails to pass up the opportunity to become goody-two shoes...* Parvati thought darkly and just as she

had suspected, Hermione reached out a hand to stop her, giving her a concerned glance. "Parvati, what's wrong? Why are you crying, what happened?" She asked worriedly, her features creasing into a frown as she took in the distressed look on the other girl's face.

*Hook, line and sinker...* Parvati thought evilly before she sobbed again, only answering with a fake, high-pitched whimper as she immediately buried her face into Hermione's shoulder, pretending to cry against her as she forced her body to quiver in sobs.

"Oh Hermione! It's just terrible! It's *Harry*, he... he..." She burst out into tears again, sobbing and whimpering as Hermione's eyebrows fused together in question at her, her eyes widening in curiosity and dread at the same time.

"What about him? What did he do, Parvati?" She asked firmly, placing her hands on the other girl's shoulders and peering at her with a grim but apprehensive look on her face, obviously expecting the worst to come out of the other girl's mouth.

Parvati sniffed loudly, wiping her eyes with the Kleenex Ron had handed her as she turned to face them, an indignant pout formed on her lips as she spoke in a shaky, high-pitched whisper, obviously distraught.

"I... See... I know you all still know that I still like him right?" She started, sniffing again as she let Ron pull her into a comforting hug, the other boy's eyes sparkling in pity and anger for a moment before Parvati immediately pulled back, shifting uncomfortably.

Hermione nodded, her coffee-brown eyes clouding over in heartbreak for a moment as she dreaded the answer to come out of Parvati's mouth, not knowing if she could handle another moment of heartbreak at the moment.

"Well... See... I just came over to invite *him* to the Yule Ball but he... He flat out refused me because he... He actually asked one of those haughty good-for-nothing Beauxbatons girls to the Yule Ball!" She burst out, crying hysterically once again as Hermione felt her heart sink painfully all the way to her feet, her eyes filling slightly with tears

for a moment but she blinked them away, not wanting to break down in front of Parvati.

“H—He did? W-Which one?” Hermione managed to say, her voice shaking slightly and cracking for a moment as she tried to ignore the painful squeezing in her chest from overcoming her, desperately trying to compose herself under Ron and Seamus’ suspicious gazes.

“I don’t know which one! I didn’t bother asking! I was too hurt to find out! And then he told me that he would never date a Gryffindor again! Oh Hermione, he’s such a jerk! He hurts me all the damn time!” Parvati cried out, wailing softly as she blew her nose on the Kleenex Ron gave her, breathing heavily.

“I know Parvati... He is...” Hermione said softly, shutting her eyes for a moment to calm herself down, turning away so they couldn’t see the hurt, disappointed look on her beautiful features. Parvati’s lips quirked slightly upwards for a split second, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“Well what do you expect from a Slytherin? And he’s friends with *Malfoy*, for Merlin’s sake! This is Potter we’re talking about! Nothing new, he’s *always* a jerk!” Ron raged but Hermione barely heard him, looking down at the floor sadly, a dejected, crestfallen look on her face.

*What did I expect anyway... Did I actually expect Harry Potter to risk his reputation and his damn pride to ask me? What was I thinking...* Hermione thought sadly, sighing as Ron and Seamus continued to comfort Parvati, who was too busy trying to hide her smug smile at Hermione’s heartbroken look.

*I should have known he wouldn’t have taken me seriously as well... Well at least I didn’t give myself to him... I don’t know how I could have handled the hurt and humiliation if I did...* She thought as she tuned Ron and Seamus out, too caught up in her thoughts to listen as the two comforted the pretty Gryffindor girl all the way to their next class.

*I wonder who he asked out this time... Probably someone prettier and much better than I am... He deserves better anyway... I*

*shouldn't get my hopes up... He said it himself... He doesn't know how he feels about me and that this would never work between us... I was crazy to think it ever could...* Hermione added silently, sighing heavily again as she sat down her seat in Transfigurations.

She didn't even notice that Parvati had sat down beside her, looking and watching her reactions intently, ignoring the weird looks Lavender was giving her from the seat she usually sat in their classroom.

*Anyway, why am 'I' thinking too much about this?! It's not as if he's actually bothering to spare enough seconds to think about 'me'... Probably already thinking about that Beauxbatons girl... Well fine...I'm sure there are other guys who'll ask me... Harry Potter is not the only guy on the planet anyway...* Hermione forced herself to think just as Prof. McGonagall began their lecture up front but Hermione barely heard her.

*No he's not... But he's the only guy I actually want...* A voice inside her sad concluded miserably as Hermione felt another familiar squeezing in her chest, causing her eyes to tear up again but she furiously wiped them away, not wanting to shed any more tears for the jerk.

"So Hermione... I was just wondering... Are *you* planning on going with a particular someone? Has someone asked you to the Yule Ball yet?" Parvati whispered to her in a sickeningly sweet voice too innocent to be true.

Hermione blinked, snapping out of her trance and looking at the girl quizzically, a confused look on her features. "Sorry, what did you say?" She asked flatly, turning lifeless eyes to the girl beside her, which the other girl returned with a cheeky smile, causing Hermione to narrow her eyes slightly at the sudden switch of mood Parvati had just done.

*Wasn't she just crying a couple of moments earlier?* She thought as she eyed Parvati's sweet smile intently for a minute before she let out a breath of exasperation and shrugged, shaking her head.

"I asked you if you were going with anyone yet..." Parvati said slowly, her eyes flashing in irritation for a minute before she forced another fake smile, wanting nothing more than to pull Hermione's lustrous brown locks out of her pretty, little innocent head.

Hermione blinked again, but shook her head slowly, shrugging to let the girl know that she obviously could not care less at the moment if anyone else asked her to the Yule Ball...

*Hell, I'll just accept to the next guy who invites me to the ball... It's not like it matters anymore who I go with... It's not like I care... It's not like Harry cares...* Hermione thought bitterly.

"Well, some guys have asked me out already but I turned them down... I couldn't care less anymore though after I found out that—I mean, well... I... Could care less... I'll probably say yes to the next one who asks me out." Hermione muttered slowly, shrugging before finally turning her attention to McGonagall, copying the notes on the board.

Parvati couldn't have wiped the smile off her face if she tried, giving Hermione a friendly smile as she cleared her throat to get her attention again, causing the other girl to look at her with a slightly annoyed expression.

"Parvati, I'm trying to listen to the class lecture... I'm sure I can find a date somewhere; it's not really important right now. What's important now, is getting this lesson right." Hermione said slowly and politely, trying to control her irritation.

"Hmph... I wouldn't get too confident about getting asked out again if I were you... It's not like guys are all lining up to go out with you, you know." Parvati snorted derisively, causing Hermione to narrow her eyes in anger.

Contrary to what Parvati may believe, boys were indeed asking her out a lot these days but instead of bragging out it like Parvati and Lavender usually would to everyone else, she had kept it to herself, not wanting to exploit her personal life to everyone else.

She didn't want to boast about something as vain and shallow as that since that was not even something she could consider an accomplishment in the first place... So those boys liked her now because she was attractive but so what? It wasn't as if she won the Nobel peace prize... She couldn't be proud of something she didn't work for in the first place...

Taking another deep, relaxing sigh to calm herself, Hermione forced herself to wrench her eyes away from Prof. McGonagall's difficult lecture and faced Parvati's smug smile again, setting her face into a controlled, serene expression.

"Parvati, I wasn't implying anything in what I said... And you don't have to take it so personally. I'm not trying to go against you or anything. I'm not your enemy and I don't want to be, okay? Now, please, can we just focus on this lesson?" Hermione asked softly, raising her eyebrows at the other girl expectantly.

Parvati raised an eyebrow at the girl's calm, peaceful tone despite the smugness she knew she had used but instead of feeling relieved, it pissed her off even more that Hermione could be so damn nice and respectful...

*What a geek... Who does she think she is? Ms. Perfect all the time? Ms. Perfectly pretty, friendly, warm, responsible smart and NICE Granger? What did Harry ever see in her?* Parvati thought in frustration but she shrugged it off, knowing she had something else to do.

"Okay... I'm... *sorry*... Hermione." She said stiffly, spitting the word 'sorry' out but Hermione didn't seem to notice, too focused on the lesson up front to notice.

"Anyway, I didn't come to talk to you to insult you... The reason I asked you that is because I happen to know that a certain boy is about to ask you to the Yule Ball. Are you interested?" Parvati asked cheerfully.

"Who is it?" Hermione asked immediately, turning to give the other girl an inspecting glare, raising an eyebrow in question.

“Well, I can’t tell you that but you’ll find out after class...He’s a great guy Hermione and I think he and you would make a really cute couple! He seems genuinely crazy about you... I can see it, Hermione, the sincere look in his eyes. If I were you, I’d bag him while I can... It’s not everyday you meet a sincere guy like that after all.” Parvati said, giggling coyly.

Hermione tried to squelch the groan that threatened to escape her, rubbing her forehead with her hand for a minute before flashed Parvati a forced smile, nodding while gritting her teeth secretly.

“I suppose so, Parvati... I guess... I guess I could go with him... Thanks for your concern... Now can we please listen to Prof. McGonagall?” Hermione said, sighing in defeat as she buried her head in her hands.

Parvati sneered evilly to herself, nodding in agreement. “Of course, dearie... I’m always concerned for your welfare... That’s what friends are for right?” She drawled in another sickeningly sweet voice but before Hermione could answer, Prof. McGonagall had rounded on them, giving them a stern, disapproving glare.

“Ms. Patil, I hate to interrupt your little discussion but I’m thinking this is something you aren’t willing to share to the entire class?” Prof. McGonagall said sharply, causing Parvati to turn an interesting shade of red and to duck down in her seat in embarrassment.

“Sorry Professor...” She mumbled angrily as Hermione promptly ignored her, not wanting to get caught in the act herself, being McGonagall’s favorite student herself.

Hermione surprised herself even more when she began tuning Prof. McGonagall out during the entire class, staring blankly at the wall above her head as she absent-mindedly began tapping her quill against the parchment.

She supposed going with someone else wasn’t so bad... It wasn’t that much of a big deal of Harry didn’t ask her out right? *So then what are we? Friends?* She asked herself, frowning as she watched Prof. McGonagall transfigure a piece of parchment into a cauldron, her mind only half-listening to what she was saying.

*Still... I had a right to hope right?* She thought, sighing heavily as she finally copied down the assignment on the board and headed out with Ron and Seamus, relieved to see that Parvati had finally left them alone.

She didn't know but she always had this sort of suspicious feeling towards her ever since Harry broke up with her... Some sort of feeling that told her not to trust Parvati completely just yet...

She knew she was probably being paranoid but she saw some kind of malice flash in Parvati's eyes every once in a while and she had this strange suspicion that it was directed at her... She couldn't remember doing anything to upset the popular Gryffindor but she knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't want to be her enemy...

She could name a lot of girls that had gone against Parvati in the past in her quest to get what she wanted and she knew that most of them had gone down in not only shame but also in utter humiliation... Parvati was one mean fighter...

Hermione couldn't even understand why they would call AJ Potter as the princess or the bitch of Slytherin when Parvati was much, *much* worse than she ever was... In fact, Hermione couldn't remember anything Harry's sister had done that was even halfway equal to Parvati's doing...

And if there was one thing she knew about Parvati, it's that she *always* got what she wanted... No matter how or which way she got it... It was something Hermione never respected in her... She even wondered why the girl was a Gryffindor in the first place.

*I wonder what she might be planning to do to that poor Beauxbatons student Harry asked...* Hermione thought sullenly, barely paying attention as Ron and Seamus ranted on and on about whom they were going to ask.

"Seamus! When are you going to ask her?" Ron exclaimed, clapping his best friend on the back as they passed by Mandy Brocklehurst and a couple of her Ravenclaw friends in the corridor, who were all heading for the Great Hall for dinner as well.



Seamus blushed red but muttered something under his breath, looking like he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. "I don't know yet Ron... I'm not even sure if she'll agree to go with me... What do you think Hermione?" He asked suddenly, turning to the dazed girl beside him, who blinked, snapping out of her thoughts and gave him a confused look.

"What do I think what, Seamus?" Hermione asked blankly again, fusing her eyebrows together as both Ron and Seamus gave her weird looks, both concern and curiosity evident in their features.

"Hermione, are you okay? You seem really out of it... The whole day actually. Is there something you're not telling us?" Ron asked her suspiciously, raising an eyebrow at her.

Hermione flushed red and was about to respond when they all heard frantic footsteps trailing after them in the corridor, causing the three to look up and see Parvati once again, racing towards them with an excited smile on her face.

"Hermione! Come on! You have *got* to come with me!!" Parvati squealed excitedly, grabbing Hermione's hand and dragging her off towards an empty classroom, leaving a baffled Ron and Seamus behind gaping with open jaws.

"But Parvati! Wait, *where* are we going?" Hermione asked in mild irritation as Parvati shoved her into the empty classroom, not getting in herself but instead, peering at Hermione's glare with an innocent smile from outside.

"Now *Viktor*, you remember what I told you! You two have fun now, I'll give you some privacy!" Parvati squealed again cutting off Hermione's protest when she slammed the door shut, leaving Hermione alone with the boy behind her.

"Uh.... I... Uh... Hello... *Herm-y-own*." A deep, familiar voice greeted behind her nervously, causing Hermione to try hiding the groan that was threatening to escape her as she turned around slowly, forcing a friendly smile.

Viktor Krum's tall frame greeted her from where he was perched on top of one empty desk, fidgeting around nervously and uncomfortably as he watched her reaction.

Hermione tried not to wince, smiling warmly at the other boy as she herself began fidgeting uneasily, silently cursing Parvati for putting her into this kind of situation with Viktor Krum of all people.

"H-Hi Viktor... I uh... Well, is there something you want to tell me or anything?" Hermione asked, though reluctantly, running a shaky hand through her mane of brown hair.

Viktor blushed in response but nodded, shoving his hands into his robe pockets as he stood up and faced her with a nervous smile, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

"Y-yeah... Vell... The thing is, Hermy-own, I vos vondering if you haff a date for the coming Yule Ball... Because your friend, Parvati tells me dat you haff none yet..." He started in that deep Bulgarian brogue that would have made any other girl's knees melt.

Hermione sighed, looking intently at her shoes as she shook her head slowly, managing a weak laugh for the tall boy. "Uhm... No, Viktor, I haven't yet... Actually, if it was possible, I had decided to go alone instead but—"

"That's vonderful then! Hermy-own... Vill you consider going to the Yule Ball vith me? I haff had my eye on you for a long time now... I... I *like* you, Hermy-own... You are not like the other girls I haff met before. I think you are very special and I would be honored if you vould accept my invite." He exclaimed, surprising Hermione with his long sentence.

"Yeah, well it's good to know that at least *someone* thinks I'm a special girl worth asking..." She muttered darkly under her breath so that Viktor couldn't hear.

Viktor gave her a curious look, fusing his thick eyebrows at her in question. "I am sorry, Hermy-own, I could not hear..." He said, looking at her but Hermione shook her head hastily, giving him a sheepish grin.

“Nothing, Viktor... Nothing! I uh...” Hermione let her voice trail off for a moment as she took a deep breath, turning away from Viktor so he couldn’t see the sad, longing look on her face.

*Oh what’s the use in declining another boy? Harry’s going with someone else anyway... I might as well go with someone else too since Harry’s never going to ask me now... I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised... He said so himself, ‘never’ assume things about him...* Hermione told herself angrily, shaking her head.

*I’ll bet he doesn’t even care... It’s not like we even had a proper relationship in the first place... I hope he’s very happy with that girl, whoever she is...* Hermione thought as she opened her eyes and managed a tight smile.

“I’d be *happy* to go to the Yule Ball with you... *Viktor*.” She answered softly, her voice barely above a whisper but Viktor heard every word, his face breaking out into an ecstatic smile as Hermione turned back to face him slowly.

“You would?! I—I... Thanks Hermy-own! I—I really... how you say...*appreciate* it very much! You will not regret it, ve will have a vonderful time!” Viktor said jovially, giving her a warm smile.

*I just hope he can get my name right soon...* Hermione thought in mild irritation as she faced him, returning his ecstatic expression with a slight nod of the head.

“Well... Then, I’ll see you then...” She said, giving him another small smile as she gently laid a hand on his shoulder for a minute before she pulled back and began heading for the door.

Viktor nearly ran ahead of her, a shy smile on his face as he shakily held the door opened for her, gesturing for her to leave the room first while Hermione gave him a half-smile, half-grimace, silently cursing herself under her breath.

“I haff to tell you Hermy-own...There is just something about you I find so attractive... I did not think you would accept but I am so pleased that you actually vant to go vith me too. Thank you.” Viktor

told her softly, flushing darker as Hermione walked out of the room, Viktor closing the door behind her.

For a short moment, Hermione couldn't help compare him to Harry... They were almost opposite in terms of behavior... Harry was impulsive... Rude, obnoxious, confident and almost *never* blushed when he didn't want to...Viktor, surprisingly enough, was easily a gentleman... Shy, respectful and very unsure of his own actions when he wasn't playing on the Quidditch field...

Hermione knew that if she were to ask herself before all this who she would choose—The sexy but obnoxious Slytherin or the gentle, quiet but popular Quidditch player, she would easily choose Viktor... But... After getting to know the guy behind Harry's atrocious personality, she didn't know why but she knew she liked... More than liked, Harry... She actually wanted the jerk...She didn't know why but she grew fond of him...

*And I hate myself for it...I hate myself for falling for such a jerk... Why couldn't I have just fallen for someone like Viktor or Ron or someone more my type...Sweet and gentle... Why did I have to fall for Potter?* Hermione asked herself irritably.

"Vell... I guess I vill see you then... Thank you again, Hermy-own..." Viktor said softly, giving her another shy smile as he gingerly lifted her hand and gave it a rather reluctant kiss, causing Hermione's cheeks to flush for a moment before he turned and headed out for his Durmstrang friends, a dreamy smile on his face.

Hermione watched him go for a minute, her eyes wide in shock and disbelief for before she shook her head and headed out for the Great Hall, clutching her books against her chest as she did.

Just as she had made her way over to her usual seat in the Gryffindor table in between Ron and Seamus, Parvati looked up from where she was giggling and whispering something with Parvati, a strange glint in her eye.

"So Hermione... How did it go?" She asked, winking at her knowingly.

Hermione's smile faltered slightly as she flinched at the implied idea in the other girl's voice, silencing Ron and Seamus questions with a glare. "Fine, Parvati, let's just drop it okay?" She snapped impatiently, sighing in exasperation before she began piling her plate with food, wanting nothing more than to stuff her mouth.

Hermione failed to notice Parvati's evil glint as she let her face break out into a smile, nodding to herself before she turned to look at something across the room where Harry was picking angrily at his food, a dark, scary look in his eyes.

Slightly confused, Parvati let her gaze travel over the Slytherin table, noticing that for once, Both AJ Potter and Blaise Zabini weren't there... *Hmm... Whatever, like I could care about them...* Parvati thought as she eyed Harry again, noticing that the boy kept his face down, his hair slightly messed up and his form visibly tense.

*Only my Harry could still look sexy even if his state right now...* Parvati thought dreamily as she watched him, sighing to herself in pure bliss.

"Hey Hermione! Seamus is right over here, you *are* a girl...Maybe—"

"Oh well-noticed, Ron!" Hermione snapped in indignation, interrupting Ron, mildly insulted by the implication of his words.

Ron flushed, shaking his head hastily at her offended tone of voice. "N—no, Hermione, I didn't mean it like that... I meant, maybe you can go with Seamus here... He seems to have lost his confidence about Mandy." Ron said, sniggering as Seamus blushed pink.

"I have *not!* I'm planning to ask her tomorrow!" Seamus said indignantly though at hearing Mandy's high-pitched laughter with her friends across the room, he sank down in his chair again, losing his nerve once more.

"Well you do that Seamus and *when*, she refuses, than you can go with Hermione here." Ron said, grinning slyly at Hermione, who flushed darker in anger again, glaring at her so-called best friend.

“And just *what* do you and Seamus think of me, Ron?! A *back-up* partner when everyone else you asked turns you down? Look, just because *you* got turned down by both AJ Potter and what’s-her-face Delacour and *Seamus* can’t muster up the courage to ask anyone, it doesn’t mean I’ll just go with you as a face-saver!” She snapped.

That shut both Ron and Seamus up as Dean and Neville laughed across from them, grinning at the two red-faced boys who were now shooting death-glares at Hermione in humiliation.

“Gee, thanks a lot, Hermione! *You* try being a boy! Besides, we didn’t mean it for you to think you’re a last resort, we just—”

“Seamus, I can’t go with you to the ball either way... I’m.. I’m already going with someone else.” She said softly, blushing in embarrassment.

Ron and Seamus both stared at her with hanging jaws, their eyes nearly popping out of their sockets as Ginny, who was right beside Neville, looked curiously at her in keen interest. “Ooh... Who are you going with Hermione?” She asked, giggling.

“Someone asked you, Hermione?! Who is it?!” Seamus squeaked, his eyes bulging out as he stared at his red-faced best friend.

“I—I’m not telling... Look, just because it took the both of you *three years* to notice, it doesn’t mean that no other guys have noticed that I’m a girl as well! In fact, a lot of guys find me attractive too, which goes to show how clueless you both really are!” She exploded, taking out her frustration on them for a minute.

Seamus just gaped at her while Ron grinned, shrugging nonchalantly. “Okay, okay... You’re a girl, is that enough?” He teased.

Hermione let out a light scream of frustration before she slammed her fist down the table and started gathering her things, stalking out of the Hall, heading for the library once again.

Ron stared after her retreating form in shock as Seamus promptly went back to his dinner, shrugging after her abrupt exit. “She’ll get

over it, Ron... I wonder who she's going with... Did *you* ask her, Neville?" He asked, turning to the round-faced boy beside him.

Neville burned bright red, shaking his head hastily. "No, I didn't! I had planned to but after seeing all those other boys chasing after Hermione, I figured I wouldn't have a chance anymore." He explained.

Ron raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. "A lot of boys were going after Hermione? We never noticed... She never told us." He mused for a moment. Ginny snorted, rolling her eyes at her brother before she flipped her hair over her shoulder at his ignorance.

"Well, Hermione's right, Ron. Just because you and Seamus are both oblivious to how beautiful she's become, it doesn't mean the rest of the male population is too. I mean, didn't you see all those guys asking her earlier? She's could have any guy she wanted now so I'm betting this guy that asked her is a real hottie.." She said, giggling.

Ron's ears turned red while Seamus choked on his food, both of them turning wide eyes to the red-haired girl across them. "I'm serious! She could have any guy she wanted now that she's easily one of the hottest girls in your year. I even saw Potter eyeing her one time... Lucky witch..." She added enviously, pouting at the mention of the popular raven-haired Slytherin.

"Bloody hell... Do you think it's Potter?" Seamus choked out again, giving Ron an incredulous stare. Ron laughed, shaking his head. "Nah... Hermione and Potter? I don't think so Seamus... Wouldn't happen in a million years." He assured, smiling.

Seamus nudged him to get his attention, leaning over to whisper something in his ear. "That's what everyone thought about you and *AJ Potter*." He hissed pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

Ron flushed but shook his head, scowling to himself. "Well that's different... We're talking about Hermione here... She wouldn't do anything as scandalous as date Potter." He said, a confident tone in his voice.

Parvati, who had heard and listened to every word of their conversation, glared at the two boys, her eyes narrowing in hatred

and loathing. *That's what I thought so once too...* She thought darkly, rolling her eyes before she redirected her attention to the object of her desires across the room again, allowing herself a small smirk.

Draco sighed heavily to himself as he headed over to his seat at the Slytherin table, knowing that if AJ couldn't be his date, there was actually no point in going to the Yule Ball at all, but he couldn't allow himself to go stag.

However, there was absolutely no way he was going with Lila or Pansy so he scanned the Ravenclaw table for a minute with lazy, silver eyes, ignoring the coy, excited looks the Ravenclaw girls seemed to be giving him as he did.

Never, in his entire life, had he ever felt anything like what he had felt when AJ had turned him down... He couldn't even remember when he had ever faced rejection and it was a lot more painful when the rejection actually came from the person he loved...

Hell, he had actually been on the fucking verge of tearing up but he would *never* allow himself to break down because of that... He assured himself that this was just a minor setback...

After all... AJ was going to be his... He *vowed* it... Never, *never* had he lost once in his life and it sure wasn't going to be now... He was willing to risk everything for this girl... His pride, his dignity, his reputation... But most of all, his *heart*...

Yes... He admitted it... He felt much more than just plain lust or desire for her... He....Draco's eyes widened at the thought, feeling a sick fluttering of something in his stomach that he had definitely *never* experienced before.

*I love her... I 'fucking' love her... My god, is this how it feels? I'm sure Harry would just 'love' to hear this...* Draco thought sarcastically as he felt another wave of that strange feeling overcome him, causing him to wince momentarily.

He just felt a strange drawing to her... Something about her that kept pulling him towards her... He *knew* it... *She's mine.. She was meant to be with 'me'...She was born to be with 'me', dammit... She has*



*'Draco Malfoy' written all over her whole bloody forehead... She's MINE... She's meant for me to claim, for me to have, to hold... Mine...* Draco thought darkly, feeling his Malfoy possessiveness overwhelm him.

*Malfoys don't share... I've been waiting for three years now... How the fuck could she do that... How the fuck could she even consider going with anyone else... I love her... Isn't that enough for her?!* He asked himself, sighing heavily.

But no... He knew he couldn't... He could *never* force her to be with him... As much as Draco loved her, over the years their friendship had developed, he knew he could never find it in his heart to force her to be with him if she didn't feel the same...

He respected her too much for that... He only wanted her happiness... As much as that very thought seemed to make Draco want to throw up at his own bloody sensitivity... He knew it... He had fallen too deep that he had actually reached that certain, *bloody* point that he loved her too much and only wanted her to be happy...

*And if ever to her, someone else would make her happy... Then, as much as it'll hurt me... I'll... I'll force myself to give in to what she wants...* Draco thought sadly, feeling another painful clenching in his chest. *But I want her... I just want her so badly... it hurts...* He thought desperately, sighing to himself before a girl managed to lock gazes with him, startling him out of his thoughts as she gave him a flirtatious smile.

"You going with anyone yet, Draco?" Harry asked gruffly, his voice slightly hoarse and shaky but Draco didn't seem to notice, too busy caught up in his own thoughts to see his best friend's state.

Draco scowled for a minute, checking the Ravenclaw table again until he sighed and dropped his head onto his hands, shaking it forlornly. "No... I don't think I want to go anymore, Harry..." He said weakly, his voice hoarse as well as he began piling his plate with food, but only to pick at it afterwards, not having the appetite to eat.

Harry clenched his jaw, his stiff, forced smile becoming hateful for a minute before he turned and looked over at the Ravenclaw table,

managing to lock gazes with Padma Patil, who was currently eyeing Draco in keen interest.

Smirking evilly, he winked at the girl and beckoned her over with a seductive smile, checking to see if Draco was still picking at his food before he met Padma's gaze again, his eyes glinting maliciously.

*If this girl is as easy to manipulate as her twin... She should be a piece of cake...* Harry thought darkly, narrowing his eyes for a moment before he forced a handsome, charming smile, which the girl returned with a coy giggle.

"What's up, Harry?" She purred seductively, perching on top of the table in front of Draco, making sure he got a good view of her legs.

Draco tensed visibly, his eyes narrowing in irritation as he was vaguely reminded of Lisa Turpin for a minute before he sighed and turned his head up to look at Padma's predatory gaze, trying hard not to grimace.

"If you want to talk to *Harry* here, *why* are you in front of *me*?" Draco asked coldly, an acid tone in his voice as Harry sneered at him, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Why Draco... I'm only doing you a favor here... Wasn't it just now, you were going on and on about how much you wanted to ask Padma here to the Yule Ball?" He said sweetly, giving Draco a dangerously innocent smile.

Draco's jaw dropped open, his eyes blazing for a moment at Harry as the other boy just sneered back at him easily, a cold twinge of malevolence in his emerald eyes that bore deep into Draco's vengeful silver ones.

*What the fuck does he think he's doing?* Draco asked him silently, glaring angrily at Harry as Padma chuckled sexily in front of them, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear as she blushed.

"I'd *love* to Draco... It would be a pleasure... And you know... All you had to do was ask me..." She murmured, running a finger delicately

down the curve of Draco's neck, causing the boy to curse under his breath.

"Padma, look... Harry wasn't actually serious about that... I'm *not* interested at all, he actually meant that—"

"That Malfoy here thinks you're the hottest gal around... Really hope you two have fun together at the Yule Ball... And I *do* mean, *fun*..." Harry added, winking at Padma as she laughed again, blushing darker in response.

Draco glared darkly at Harry as Padma leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, leaning closer to whisper something in his ear, causing Draco to stiffen in disgust. "I'm sure we will have fun, Draco... Thanks for asking me... I'll see you then..." She whispered, letting her lips linger on his ear for a split second before she pulled away and winked at him again, sauntering back to her table, swaying her hips as she did.

Draco covered his face with his hands for a minute, inwardly groaning darkly before he snapped his head back up, glaring spitefully at his so-called best friend, who was picking casually at his food as if nothing had happened at all.

"What the hell is your problem, Harry?! What did you think you were doing setting me up with Patil?! You had no right to do that! No bloody right!" Draco hissed angrily at him, his eyes flashing.

Harry just sneered back calmly, his own eyes flashing but he just relaxed in his seat, taking a sip from his goblet of pumpkin juice before speaking.

"What are you talking about, Draco? I was doing you a favor, setting you up with Patil... Who knows? She could be the *love* of your *life*..." He answered mockingly, sniggering in satisfaction.

Draco's face twisted into a scornful snarl, glaring at Harry with lightning bolts in his eyes. "You know very well that I do *not* want to go out with anyone else right now! You did that on bloody purpose, Potter!" He hissed darkly, narrowing his eyes.

Harry's eyes glinted maliciously for a moment as he looked up and calmly met Draco's hateful gaze at him, not at all intimidated by the anger in the other boy's eyes. "*Exactly*... Look... I know what you're thinking Malfoy... You think you can get my sister for yourself... I'm not about to let that happen... I'm just making sure *nothing* happens." Harry answered darkly.

Draco's eyes clouded over but not in anger but in crestfallen disappointment, looking at Harry intently. "Why? What is your problem Harry?! Why the fuck don't you want to support me on this? You're my best friend; *you* of all people should know that—"

"You want to know my problem, Draco? Huh? My problem is *you*, you smarmy bastard!" Harry interrupted angrily, glaring at him.

Draco looked at him as though he was insane, his eyes widening incredulously. "What?! Me? What the fuck did I ever do to you?!" He asked, his voice cracking.

"Look, Malfoy, I saw how you looked at AJ but if you think for one moment, I'm going to let you take her away from me, you're wrong! I won't let you, you good for nothing asshole! You're my best friend, I trusted you with everything I had and now you want my twin too?! Well, you can't have her!" Harry blurted out, a strange sense of protectiveness in his voice.

"Why must you always think of yourself, Harry?! Why must you always put yourself ahead of others?! Can't you for once think of how that makes *me* feel?!" Draco countered easily, slamming his fist down on the table.

"Oh I'm hearing this from the biggest snob in school, Draco Malfoy?! Hah! That's rich, Draco, hilarious! Utterly and completely hysterical!" Harry said sarcastically, a horrible scowl on his face.

"Shut up Harry! Shut the *fuck* up! You know, I know what your problem is, you think that in starting a relationship with AJ, she's going to forget about you and neglect you right? You think I'm trying to take her away from you, is that it?" Draco said angrily, a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Draco—”

“She’s your sister, Harry. She’s loved you your whole life and nothing, *no one*, not me or any one else could ever change that. And if you’re too dense to realize that you can’t bloody keep her love to yourself forever, then I feel sorry for you, you selfish bastard!” Draco spat out harshly, causing Harry to shut his eyes in pain at his words.

“Fuck off, Malfoy! Just fuck off! I know what I think, okay?! You know, *you’re the* reason AJ and I fought in the first place! *You* corrupted her somehow! All because you want to sleep with her a few damn times, is that it?!” Harry snapped accusingly, his eyes clouding over in anguish.

“Look you asshole, whatever fight you two had, I had nothing to do with it. She must have come to her senses and told you off for being such a jerk! You know, as hard as it may be for someone like *you* to believe, I—I....I *love* her, Harry. I...I *love* her. I don’t know if *you’ve* ever experienced actual *love* with Granger right now, but if you knew how I felt then maybe—” Draco never got to finish as Harry’s eyes flashed again, causing him to stop in surprise.

“*Love?! Love?! What the hell would you know about love?! I’ve loved my sister my whole life! You’ve only known her three years! And don’t you put Hermione into this, Malfoy! You don’t know her at all! You don’t love AJ! It’s lust! That’s all it is! I love her! I’m her twin brother! What are you to her? Nothing!*” Harry raged, his form shaking in anger.

Draco paled, shocked and hurt by his last words as his eyes filled with a deep sense of pain but he looked away and kept his emotions hidden, managing a malicious sneer of contempt.

“Oh so it’s *Hermione* now, is it Harry?! You weak, pathetic piece of crap! I thought she was nothing?! Huh? Look where you are now... Reduced to a weak, pitiful fool... You’re pathetic, Harry... Just plain pathetic... Why don’t you just admit that—”

“Shut *up*, Draco!! Leave her out of this! I have *not* grown weak! After all this... I’ve just grown to have a sort of respect for her... If you want to talk weak fools, then its *you!*” Harry retorted spitefully.

“Hermione fucking *mudblood* Granger?! If you feel so much for that damn Gryffindor, then maybe you could understand how *I* feel right now! I *love* your sister, Harry and I would *never* take her away from you... All I want is a part of her love! Can’t you accept that?! Please...?” Draco pleaded, sighing in exasperation.

“She’s not about ready to handle someone like *you*, Draco! She needs someone to love her, take care of her...nurture her with love and affection...Do you honestly believe that you, *you* of all people can give that to her? You’ve corrupted her enough as it is! Look at the other girls you’ve been with, you’re just like me! You’re a—”

“I *know* I’m not the best one for her, Harry...Don’t you think I know that already? But you wanna know something else? At least I’m man enough to admit it...I love her enough to be willing to *try* to be her perfect guy...” Draco whispered, his eyes dulling to a pained gray.

“Draco, you’re a playboy! You’re a slut, you’re a—”

“Harry, don’t you get it?! They all mean nothing to me! They’re nothing! I *love* AJ! I love her! It’s something that’s *developed* over all these *years*... I know it... And stop saying she’s not ready or she’s not mature enough or any other of that crap! She’s much more mature than you’ve ever been Harry! She’s been so for years, you just never gave her a chance to walk on her own goddamn feet which is why she acts so helpless without you!” Draco finished for him in a dead whisper, a cold glint in his eyes.

Harry didn’t say anything to this, just glaring coldly back at his best friend as he briefly recognized that the point Draco had given him was the same thing AJ had been screaming at him before.

*I just don’t want to lose my sister yet... Is that so hard for all of you to understand?! I can’t let her handle herself on her own because then, I’d be letting her go...I’m not ready to give her up...* Harry thought sadly, his eyes filling slightly with bitter tears.

Draco's hard features seemed to soften in concern as he put a comforting hand on his best friend, causing Harry to look up and meet his eyes.

"Harry, I'm sorry mate, I didn't mean it that way, I just meant—" But he didn't finish as Harry nodded abruptly and stood up, the tears now gone and his eyes back to their cold mask again, giving Draco a calm look.

"Forget it, I'm sorry too. Look... Why don't we just cool off for now, Draco... I need some air... I can't handle this right now; I don't want to talk to you about this right now... I'm sorry, I'll just... I'll just go now..." He says softly, giving Draco a small, weak but forced smile of reassurance before he walked out of the Hall, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

Draco watched him go silently for a moment, sighing heavily before he buried his head in his arms, trying in vain to ignore the giggles directed at him coming from Padma Patil's group of friends, shaking his head miserably.

*When will this nightmare be over...?*

Hermione groaned loudly as she heard a loud tapping noise on the window from where she was sleeping peacefully in her bed in the Gryffindor girls' dorms, causing her to mumble something irritably in her sleep, turning to bury her head in her pillow.

*Tap-Tap!*

*Argh... What the hell is that?!* Hermione thought in annoyance as she tossed in her bed again, yanking her pillow tighter over her head as she tried to muffle the annoying sound away.

*Tap-Tap-Tap!*

Hermione groaned again and yanked her blanket over herself, shutting her eyes tightly as she tried to go back to sleep, letting out an exasperated breath of air.

*Tap-tap-tap-tap-TAP!*

*Argh!!* Hermione inwardly screamed as she wrenched her eyes open and peered around sleepily with half-opened brown eyes, checking to see if her other dorm mates were asleep. Seeing both Parvati and Lavender still buried deep under the covers, she rolled her eyes to herself, annoyed that those two girls could sleep through anything without waking up.

Yawning, she groggily looked over to her bedside table and snatched the clock, squinting in the darkness of the room to see what time it was.

*2:30AM... Great...* She thought, yawning once more as she heard the annoying tapping again, causing her to curse under her breath and turn to look at the window, seeing a white, fluffy blur fluttering outside, peering at her with wide eyes.

*What the—* She thought as she bolted up from the bed so fast that she had ended up stumbling to the floor, freezing for a moment as Lavender let out a ladylike snort from her bed before shifting around.

Hermione listened quietly for a minute, waiting for Lavender's breathing to become regular again before she let out a breath of relief, laughing lightly under her breath before she walked over to the window, hesitating for a moment before opening it slowly.

Instantly, a familiar snowy white owl flew into the room, startling Hermione for a second as she let out a small gasp before the owl plopped itself comfortably on her bed, hooting its indignation.

Hermione walked over to it slowly and plopped down beside it, instantly recognizing the beautiful creature as Harry's popular female owl... The snowy white owl that every female in Hogwarts had hoped would head for their direction during mornings when the mails would be delivered in hopes Harry would be sending them a letter.

*Well, she's here now...* Hermione thought as she began stroking the beautiful owl gently, admiring its silky soft feathers as the owl hooted its appreciation, ruffling itself comfortably.

"Hey... What have you got there?" She whispered affectionately as she gently began untying the piece of parchment attached to her leg, the owl answering her with an affectionate nip on her finger.



*Hmm... That's odd... I heard Harry's owl is hardly ever friendly to anyone else besides him... Especially the girls he dates...* Hermione thought, smiling as the owl settled herself on her shoulder, peering at her hands as the Gryffindor began unrolling the letter.

"I take it you like *me* then, huh?" She teased the beautiful creature for a moment as she could only hoot in response, ruffling her feathers proudly again as she glanced at her.

Hermione let out a soft chuckle as she finally revealed the letter but before she had a chance to read it, a single rose petal had fallen from the open parchment, falling very gracefully onto her scarlet bed covers.

"A rose petal?" She asked no one in particular, a small, warm smile on her face as she gently picked up the soft petal for a minute, immediately catching a faint whiff of its beautiful scent before she set it down on her night table, turning to the letter again.

"Alright, let's see what your jerk of a master has to tell me..." She said to the owl, who could only hoot in response but Hermione sensed a strange note of amusement there for a minute before she shrugged and turned to the parchment, reading the graceful, elegant handwriting.

*Hermione...*

*I know you probably don't want to see my face right now after what happened the last time we met up with each other on the Quidditch pitch, but please, give me another chance. If you would, at this very moment, meet up with me in front of the statue we used to get out to Hogsmeade, I would be very grateful. You don't have to send Hedwig back with your answer, I'll be waiting downstairs should you decide to come or not... Oh, and if ever Hedwig was any trouble at all to you, I apologize... She isn't too keen to strangers. If you would, I have something to talk to you about. I hope you come... Please bring the rose petal with you...*

*H.*

*J.P.*

Hermione's eyebrows immediately fused together in confusion, looking at the parchment questioningly.

"But... If he's going with someone else to the Yule Ball, what on earth could he want to talk to me about? Does he want to stay friends or something? And why do I have to bring the rose petal?" Hermione whispered out loud.

Sighing, she shrugged, inwardly deciding for a moment that she didn't care who they were going with to the Yule Ball anyway... What matters now is that Harry wanted to meet her... He wanted to talk to her... She could forget about their dates for now... For now, she just wanted to hold that darn boy in her arms and never let him go, even if it was for the last time, depending on what he had to say...

"So... *Hedwig*, huh? What a pretty name..." Hermione said softly, stroking the owl again as the owl hooted out softly in response, ruffling its feathers in pleasure, nipping her finger one last time before she finally took off, flying into the night.

Hermione watched her go for a minute, a small, sad smile on her face before she sighed and reached over to her trunk to get Harry's sweater, wrapping it around her sheer nightgown for a minute.

Slipping her petite feet into a comfortable pair of slippers, she pulled the comfy sweater tighter around herself, shivering slightly as she stuffed the petal into her pocket before she began heading off, carefully closing the door behind her.

*I just hope I don't get caught... What a lovely sight for McGonagall to see... Hermione Granger in her night robes walking through the corridors at night.* She thought wryly, sighing as she exited the portrait hole, ignoring the disapproving looks the fat lady sent her.

Hermione slowly made her way towards the statue, shivering every now and then and pausing cautiously to make sure that Filch or Mrs. Norris wasn't anywhere nearby before she continued.

*I can't believe I've been reduced to something as low as this...* Hermione thought in shame and guilt, sighing as she finally turned

into the corridor of the statue Harry had been talking about, looking around for a trace of the raven-haired Slytherin.

Then, as though someone had cast a spell on it, the rose petal had floated out of her robe pocket, startling Hermione as it lay suspended in mid-air, its beautiful scent surprisingly filling the entire corridor.

Hermione watched it curiously as the rose petal began magically trailing off, heading forward and obviously leading her somewhere where she knew the Slytherin was. Hermione couldn't help smile softly as she followed the rose petal through a series of corridors, amazed and touched at the same time how much of a romantic Harry could actually be.

As the petal floated on and on, Hermione was suddenly aware of how painful her chest suddenly was with her heart fluttering inside it nervously, both excited and scared at the same time of what Harry had to say to her.

The rose petal suddenly stopped in front of an empty classroom, magically slipping under the crack of the door just as Hermione stopped right in front of it, her hand just about to clutch around the door knob.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she shakily opened it to reveal the room, which, to her surprise, was filled with the strong yet relaxing scent of roses, causing her to quirk her lips into a smile again as she inhaled them slowly.

Eyes wide in curiosity, she turned to look around for the rose petal, looking more confused as ever when she didn't find a trace of it anywhere but just as she was about to whirl around again, she felt a strong but gentle arm wrap around her waist and a hand covering her eyes from behind. Now openly smiling, she placed her own hand over his and caressed it gently, trying to remove it from her eyes.

"Looking for this?" A soft, sexy voice whispered in her ear as the hand covering her eyes was removed and she was turned around to see Harry's gorgeous smile, his emerald eyes glowing in warmth, causing her heart to jump into her throat.

Hermione looked to his hand where he clutched the single rose petal she had been following, causing her eyes to widen in surprise as she looked back up at him, returning the smile but before she could say anything, Harry had spoken up once again.

"I *would* give it back to you but wouldn't you much rather prefer *this*?" He whispered as he carefully drew a single whole rose from his robes, gently letting the rose caress Hermione's soft cheek before he let it trail down her slender neck.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment as Harry gently put the rose into her hands before he bent down and let his own lips linger over her cheek, trailing it down the curve of her neck as he had done with the rose earlier, only this time, Hermione shivered in the action.

"Mmm... I don't know which felt better... The rose... Or that..." Hermione whispered back, causing Harry's lips to quirk upwards into a smile from where he let them linger on her neck, dropping a feather-light kiss on her again before he pulled back and gave her another smile.

Harry opened his mouth to say something but Hermione put a finger gently to his lips, smiling mischievously, her eyes twinkling as she lifted the rose up and slowly traced his lips with it, causing Harry's breath to hitch in his throat and his eyes to cloud over in desire.

"Hermione..." He groaned, shutting his eyes as she set let the rose travel from his lips to his cheek, stroking it gently before she leaned over and placed a soft kiss on the exact spot, causing Harry's knees to weaken.

Just as Harry was about to open his eyes, he was surprised even more when Hermione pressed her lips to his in a hot, searing kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck and yanking him down to deepen the kiss, causing both of their trapped desires for the other to burst out in each of their veins.

Harry's arms had automatically found their way around Hermione's familiar slender waist and Harry couldn't help but feel a strange sense... A strange feeling of coming home as he did...

It was as if, their bodies pressed together like this was the most natural... The most comfortable place in the world to him... Like he was home... Like he was meant to be there and that there was a real reason behind the fact that their forms seemed to fit each other perfectly...

Hermione had let her one of her hands travel over to entangle itself in his hair, pulling very softly at the raven strands as she inwardly urged him to take control of the kiss, which he did eventually, pulling her closer to him and kissing her as though he was out of air and she was his only source of oxygen.

And for once... He didn't think it was possible but as he stood there, kissing her, he forgot about everything... he forgot about all his problems... He forgot about being the fourth TriWizard champion... He forgot about the bet... He forgot about how his housemates would react... he forgot about his fight with AJ, with Draco... *Everything...*

All that mattered was Hermione... All that mattered was the girl he was kissing... The girl in his arms... The whole world around him, *his* whole around seemed to vanish before him as he could only focus on the Gryffindor girl with him...

He doubted that at this very moment, he couldn't even care if his whole house had walked in on them right now... because at the moment, he didn't care... Nothing else mattered to him... It was a strange feeling... Something he had never experienced before... And it scared him... It truly scared him...

It was as if, when he was with Hermione, he could let go of all his own fucked-up problems... He could just savor the feeling of being with her... Everything else seemed to disappear with her... It was as if they were in their own little world... A world without fears and problems... A world he could just enjoy himself...

Harry forced himself to yank away abruptly, his eyes glazed over in uncontrolled passion and his cheeks flushed but he didn't care, looking intently at Hermione, who was breathing as hard as he was, looking at him with her beautiful, innocent eyes.

*But I can't forget about my problems... I can't right now...* He thought in defeat, shaking his head at himself before he stared deep into Hermione's coffee brown eyes, admiring her delicate features.

*My god... She's beautiful...* He thought for a moment, taking a loose strand of Hermione's hair and tucking it behind her ear for her, leaning over to give her a brief, affectionate kiss on the cheek.

"Is there something wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked softly, looking curiously at him, wondering why he had stopped.

Harry blinked out of his own deep thoughts, turning over to give Hermione a reassuring smile, shaking his head. "No...I was just thinking about some problems I've been having but they're nothing... We shouldn't bother with it, I—"

"Well, maybe I can help then. I've helped you before... Remember?" Hermione said knowingly, breaking his train of thought as she gently cupped his cheek with her hand, giving him a smile.

Harry looked deep into her eyes for a moment before he sighed heavily, giving in as he ran a hand through his hair, pulling away from Hermione and sitting down one of the empty chairs.

"I was just thinking about my sister... Her and Malfoy, I—"

"Harry, you know, not to intrude on your personal life but I have to point out that I saw the way he was looking at her... I saw something in Malfoy's eyes that I never thought I'd see in him." Hermione said, giving him a wry smile.

"She doesn't need that right now! I don't expect you to understand me, Hermione, you don't even know my sister *or* Draco well enough to understand this." Harry said coldly, obviously wanting to drop the topic of the conversation.

"Harry, if you're trying to be protective of her, you should stop... She deserves someone who will love her Harry... Someone to make her happy." Hermione said sadly, speaking not only for AJ but also for her own thoughts.

"She already has *me* for that!" He snapped irritably, his eyes flashing in indignation at her.

"How sure are you that you're going to be there for her forever? How sure are you that she'll be the only one who'll need your love in the future?" Hermione countered easily, her eyes pleading with his.

Harry's facial features clouded over for a minute, looking at her in accusation. "Just what is *that* supposed to mean, Hermione?" He asked slowly. Hermione sighed, walking over to where he was sitting down one of the desks and sitting down beside him, looking at him straight in the eye, as much as it strained her to do so.

"Pretty soon, you'll have your own life too Harry... She needs to have her own life too... Someone to take care of her when you'll be too busy taking care of someone else too... She needs more than your love Harry... Just like... Just like *you* need more than just hers..." She hinted slowly, pleading with him silently once again, trying to find some sort of affection behind his stormy eyes.

*I need your love too Harry... Can't you understand that?! Can't you get that through your thick head?!* She screamed at him silently but she kept her mouth shut, not wanting to tell him.

Harry's eyes had darkened for a moment, looking like he was going to refuse her advice but he turned away so she couldn't see his face, his form tense and unrelenting before he sighed and buried his head in his hands.

Hermione watched him silently, not wanting to say anything else that might frighten him off again as Harry slowly lifted his head from his hands, making Hermione tense for a minute when she saw the hardened, forced smile on his face.

"Forget about it... She's not what I wanted to talk to you about, Hermione... I uh... I just wanted to *apologize* for the other night in the Quidditch pitch... I uh..." Harry's shaky voice trailed off as he got off the chair in one swift motion, turning around to face Hermione again.

Hermione's eyebrows fused together in confusion as she shot out of her seat as well, looking at Harry in surprise at his sudden change of

topic. “Oh, but Harry, are you sure? From what it looks like, you still need to talk about this some more rather than—”

“Hermione! I uh... *forget it...* I’m fine... I *don’t* want to talk about this right now... Let’s just focus on *us*, right now, okay? Just *us*...All about *us*.” Harry said persistently, pulling Hermione into his arms and burying his face in her shoulder, taking in the girl’s sweet scent.

“Harry, please, I know you—” Hermione didn’t finish as Harry met her lips again in another passionate kiss, cutting her off midsentence as he tightened her arms around her and pressed their forms together again, kissing her with such a force that made her head begin to spin in dizzy circles.

Hermione inwardly sighed as she wrapped her arms around him as well and began rubbing her hand up and down his back to comfort him, causing the Slytherin to relax for a moment, his eyes fluttering shut as he kissed her deeper, almost as if he was seeking to find comfort in her lips.

Finally out of breath and both needing air, they both pulled back at the same time, gazing quietly into each other’s eyes as they did before Harry pulled back, his hand reaching into something in his robes before he pulled out his wand, giving Hermione a grin.

“Actually, what I really came here to ask you about was that... Well...” Harry let his voice trail off as he flicked his wand over himself for a minute, causing another beautiful rose to appear in between his clenched teeth as he gave Hermione a sheepish smile.

Hermione couldn’t hold back her giggles as Harry wiggled his eyebrows up and down suggestively, the rose still clenched in between his teeth as he knelt down in front of her, looking up at her with a grin on his face.

Hermione shook her head, amused and touched at the same time as she gingerly took the rose out of his mouth and inspected it carefully, finding something written magically in the petals. Her eyes wide in anticipation and worry at the same time, she read the inscription written around the petals, her breathing caught in her throat.



*Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?* Hermione read silently, her eyes widening and feeling a dangerously dreading feeling at the pit of her stomach, causing her to gulp audibly and turn to face him with a horrified look.

Harry's anxious smile dropped for a minute as he took in her horrified look, his emerald eyes flashing dangerously in panic for a minute. "Well? Hermione..." Harry said, his shaky voice cracking for a minute as he stared at her, watching the reaction on her face with a slightly panicked look.

*Parvati.. She knew I was never going to break my word once I accepted Viktor's invitation... She knew it... And she used it against me...* Hermione finally realized, her eyes widening in shock and her own stupidity.

"Harry... I uh... I thought you had already asked someone else to the Yule Ball..." Hermione answered truthfully, turning wide, pleading eyes to Harry, who just answered her with a genuinely confused look, his eyebrows fusing together.

"Someone else? Who told you that?! I haven't even asked *anyone* yet except for you, Hermione..." He said, looking at her as though she was crazy.

*Parvati... Parvati Patil...Dammit... Dammit... It's too damn late now.. I can't believe how stupid I was! Dammit!!* Hermione screamed at herself, turning away from Harry for a moment so he couldn't see her face.

"Hermione?? Well, what's your answer?" Harry asked, his voice shaking again as he eyed her movements, biting his lip as he began dreading her answer for the fear of actually being rejected for the first time in his life.

Hermione turned back to look at him, meeting his gaze with a sad, longing look in her eyes that caused Harry to stiffen in cold anticipation.

"Harry... I'd *love* to go to the ball with you... I really want to... You have absolutely no idea how happy you've made me now that you've

asked me... Honestly, I didn't think you would... I thought you wouldn't want to go with me... From the way you were avoiding me in the halls, I thought you hated me... I honestly never expected this from you..." Hermione said softly, cupping his cheek in her hand again, her eyes sparkling with warmth.

Harry winced at the touch, shutting his eyes as he tensed visibly now, his hands slowly closing into tight angry fists.

"But?"

The harsh tone of his voice caused Hermione to flinch, as she took in a deep, shaky breath of air, wanting nothing more than to disappear into the floor as she felt the familiar pain in her chest begin to throb into her.

"Harry... Someone else already asked me to the ball..." She said very softly, her voice barely above a hoarse whisper as she looked away from his betrayed, accusing emerald eyes, not having the strength to face them.

Before she could say anything else, Harry had wrenched his face into a furious sneer of scorn and malice, snapping his hand up to snatch over hers and angrily wrenching it away from his cheek, flinging it back roughly at her.

Hermione gasped at the cold gesture as Harry glared darkly at her, briefly reminding her that the Slytherin she knew before as her enemy was still inside him, not at all gone but just in hiding.

Harry, at that very moment, saw nothing but red all around him, his mind revolving around the very idea of someone else being with Hermione... Someone else asking her before he could...

*Damn her... How the fuck could she accept?! Did she think I was going to weep and cry over this?! Well then fine... If she's going to play that game... Then I'd be happy to oblige... I thrive at this... I never lose...* He thought darkly, glaring at her.

"Don't touch me... You... Slut...You... How the *fuck* could you accept?! You *knew* I was going to ask *you* and then—"

Hermione's eyes flashed at the harsh insult, immediately tearing up but she held them back, wanting nothing more than to release her anger at the moment.

"No I didn't, Harry! No, I *didn't*! I didn't know you were going to ask *me*, hell, I didn't even know you were planning to! It's not like we're actually in a real relationship for me to assume something like that! You said so yourself right? *Never* assume things about the great Harry Potter! So I did just that! How the hell was I supposed to know that amongst all those other hundred girls who want to ask *you* out, Harry, that you were going to ask *me*?!" Hermione ranted, glaring darkly at him.

Harry's eyes narrowed darkly as he glared at her, his face twisting into a hateful growl as he met her challenging gaze.

"Well you shouldn't have accepted anyone else, Granger!! No one, *no one* rejects Harry Potter and you of all people should know that! Why the hell would you accept anyone else when you knew, *I* was going to ask you?!" Harry raged, his pride getting the better of him.

Hermione looked at him with crazed brown eyes, visibly shaking in absolute anger and rage.

"You know Harry, it isn't always about *you*, okay?! Would you forget about your damn pride for one second and for once, think about others?! See, that's your damn problem! You always think of yourself! Didn't you even consider how *I* feel about this whole thing?! It's much more than just being rejected or humiliated!" Hermione snapped at him angrily, her eyes filling with tears of frustration.

Harry glared back at her calmly, not even blinking as he dared to ask the question that he knew he would be hating the answer to but he had to know... He had to know who she was going with...

"Who is he? Who are you going with, I'll bash his bloody brains out! Who the *fuck* is he?!" Harry raged angrily, slamming his fist against the nearby table, causing Hermione to jump in surprise at his hostility.

Hermione flinched again but shook her head hastily, gently resting her hand on his shoulder to calm her down but Harry grimaced at the

tender touch and wrenched himself away again, his eyes flashing indignantly.

He couldn't believe this was happening to him... First that fight with his twin... Then with his best friend... And now, *Hermione* was doing this to him! What the fuck was this? Was this some sort of karma on him for everything he's been doing lately? He was going to explode!

*I can't take anymore dammit! I can't take anymore of this crap!* He screamed inside his head, trembling in suppressed rage. "Who *is* it?!" Harry yelled again, this time his voice at top volume, causing Hermione to step back in fear but she raised her chin up, meeting his angry glare.

"That is none of your damn business, Harry! Are you my *boyfriend*?! Huh?!" She retorted easily, causing the raven-haired Slytherin to just stare back in silence, not having anything else to say.

"That's right! You're *not*! Therefore, you don't have any right to speak to me like that! Besides, it wasn't my fault! Someone else told me that you had already asked another girl so I had no choice but to accept another guy's invitation!" Hermione tried to explain, giving him a desperate look.

Harry's eyes widened, his face set into a dangerously calm expression. "Well, if you won't tell me who asked you, then at least fucking *tell me who* told you that fucking lie!" He raged, the curse words rolling right out of his mouth.

Hermione bit her lip for a minute, briefly having an inner debate with herself whether or not she should tell Harry that it was Parvati who had set her up but as she saw Harry's flashing eyes again, she decided it would be best not to right now.

"Harry, it doesn't matter... It's just a ball anyway... It doesn't matter who we go with, that's not important to me anymore... What's important to me is that you asked me, Harry... You asked *me*..." Hermione said softly, moving forward to kiss him again but Harry moved away, looking infuriated.

"I don't care, Hermione! What the hell do you think of me?! I'm not going to play second fiddle to anyone! Do you understand me?! Don't you forget who I am Hermione! I could have any other girl I wanted and here I am, going for *you*! Do you have any idea how stupid you are?!" Harry said derisively, laughing mockingly at her.

Hermione couldn't say anything else in pure anger and hurt... She just glared right back at him, boring right into his eyes before she raised a hand to slap him, wanting nothing more than bruise those pale, flawless cheeks but this time, Harry caught her hand with his own, holding it tightly in his grasp.

"Y-You jerk! You good-for-nothing, asshole, you smarmy *bastard*!" She screamed at him, furiously trying to pound on his chest with her fists but Harry caught them in his own and held them tightly, smirking maliciously at her.

"Look... *Granger*... Whoever this *loser* is....Frankly, I don't care who he is right now...Because if you are dumb enough not to realize that *I'm* the best thing that's ever happened to you, then that's fine... *You've* obviously decided that I'm not good enough for you. It's not like I was ever forcing you to go with *me* anyway! Go with someone else, for all I care!" Harry yelled at her, narrowing his eyes.

"Harry, you know it isn't like that at all... If you would only understand that—"

"There's *nothing* to understand, Hermione. You're right, I'm not your boyfriend anyway, and I don't *intend* to be... So just forget it... I'm sorry I even asked you... Sorry for myself that is... That I actually stooped that low... I should find someone worthy of me." Harry added snidely, eyeing her up and down in loathing as Hermione let the tears run freely now, turning away from him.

"Because you've obviously found someone else to be more worthy of a mudblood like *you*." He finished coldly, lifting the rose up to her eye level before he flung it carelessly to the ground.

"I can't believe you, Hermione! I... I actually cared about you... More than any other girl I've dated in my whole fucking life... I thought you were different than they were... What more did you want from me?!"

For me to declare my goddamn undying love and loyalty?! Is this how you wanted to repay me for hurting you the other night? And for everything I've done the past years?!" Harry said, his voice shaking.

Hermione didn't answer, just glaring coldly at the cold floor, the tears forming in her eyes falling listlessly down to it drop by drop.

"Well, congratulations, *Gryffindor*, because you won! You've broken your enemy's pride, you've just won! You win this time! Enjoy the victory while it lasts! You certainly have earned it!" Harry said in anger, angry tears forming in his eyes again before he bolted out of the room, slamming the door as hard as he could behind him.

Hermione flinched painfully at the cold, unforgiving sound as it echoed through the dark silence of the classroom, leaving her utterly alone in the unwelcoming room as she finally crumpled to the cold floor, crying softly.

*Leave it to me to fall in love with the guy who has this special talent of hurting me this way...* Hermione thought bitterly as she buried her head in her hands, filling the empty, silent classroom with her anguished sobs as the beautiful roses lay on the floor beside her, completely and totally forgotten.

The sobbing, crumpled figure of the once proud Gryffindor girl weeping on the ground never noticed the fallen, crumpled rose petal floating limply through the air again and again where Harry was before, filling the room once again with its calming scent.

"What's our first class, Draco?" Blaise asked as he, Draco and AJ made their way to their the Great Hall for breakfast the next morning, all three Slytherins with dark circles under their eyes.

"Charms..." Draco mumbled almost automatically, glaring darkly at every other student that looks at him, causing them to look away hastily, suddenly nervous as they hurried on, not wanting to face his anger so early in the morning.

"Where's Harry?" Blaise asked, looking around for any trace of the other half of the Slytherin duo but Draco just shrugged, yawning to himself, both boys not noticing AJ tensing up beside them.

"Haven't seen him all morning... Probably slept in another girl's bed or something... Don't worry about it." Draco answered, nodding briefly as Crabbe and Goyle passed them, giving them a nod of acknowledgement.

AJ kept unusually silent between the two boys, her eyes slightly unfocused and slightly swollen, as her face looked paler than usual, clutching her books tightly to her chest.

"Are you okay, AJ? You seem quiet... And you don't look too well... Did you get enough sleep last night?" Blaise suddenly asked, snapping AJ out of her thoughts as the two boys turned to look at her.

"I—I'm fine, Blaise... I'm just... *Tired*, that's all... I'll be okay." She answered weakly, avoiding Draco's eyes as the boy seemed to look at her intently for a moment.

She definitely could *not* handle him right now... She didn't even know how to react to him... She did not need to look into those damn pretty silver eyes... Dammit... *Dammit!* She thought, wrenching her gaze away from his eyes.

She couldn't seem to look at him straight in the face ever since that whole Great Hall scene before... She couldn't stand it because every time she did, she remembered exactly how he had looked when she had turned him down...

"Well look... If it isn't the Slytherin princess herself... Once again, accompanied by her body guards... Ooh... You don't look too good Potter... What's wrong? Bad hair day?" Parvati Patil said snidely as the three Slytherins passed her in the corridor but the three didn't even glance her direction, snubbing the girl out cold.

The other Slytherins passing by sniggered at Parvati's outraged, humiliated face as Draco briefly shot her a sneer in response. "Take my advice, Patil... *Never* taunt a Slytherin... *Never* try to beat us at our own game because we *thrive* in it... The only difference between Slytherins and Gryffindors when starting a fight is that a Slytherin actually *enjoys* it." Draco hissed at her threateningly, his eyes flashing.

“Draco, no, let it go, forget it.” AJ said weakly, shaking her head at him for him to stop but before Draco could say anything, they all heard footsteps heading for them, causing them to see Hermione racing for her, an anxious look on her face.

“Potter, where’s your brother?” Hermione asked abruptly, looking intently at AJ, who scoffed at her in response, her swollen eyes narrowing for a split second in suspicion.

“Hey, sod off, mudblood! Can’t you see he’s obviously *not* with her?! Besides, why would *he* want to a long-molared Gryffindor like you?!” Draco answered coldly, giving Hermione a warning sneer.

“Hello Professor Moody!” Hermione called over his shoulder, causing Draco to flush in humiliation and whip around immediately, his eyes widening but his jaw dropped when he saw nothing but air behind him.

“Twitchy little ferret, are you, Malfoy?” Hermione taunted back easily, causing Draco to flush darker as Hermione laughed in amusement, a smirk on her features.

AJ glared at her, stepping up to her so that they were face to face, slightly intimidating the other girl with her small advantage in height. For some strange reason, she suddenly felt a strong surge of anger towards the girl for that comment, not exactly knowing why that was the case.

“*Don’t* call him a ferret, Granger... The only animals in this school are in *your* house, not *ours*. And as for my brother, I *don’t* know where he is, Granger... I’m not his bloody *keeper*, and I don’t *intend* to be.” AJ answered weakly but coldly, giving the girl a calm look.

Hermione stepped back for a moment, briefly reminded of how Harry had looked last night himself before she shook her head, clearing the painful memory away as she looked at AJ again, trying to start a decent conversation.

“Well, would you have any idea where he is? I just have something important to talk to him—”



“Why do *you* even *care*, Granger?! Sod off, okay?! Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you bitch-slapped me before!” AJ spat out angrily, her eyes flashing before she whipped around, walking off.

“Would you forget about that, Potter?! You know, maybe if you weren’t so darn helpless all the bloody time then maybe—”

Hermione stopped abruptly when AJ snapped her head around to face her, a look of pure explosive anger in her eyes as she whipped out her wand immediately, pointing it at the surprised Gryffindor.

Hermione froze, looking at the Slytherin girl with wide eyes, not at all daring to move for fear of the girl hexing her at any moment as all the students around them gasped, watching the two well-known rivals cautiously.

“Potter... Think about what you’re doing... We’re in the middle of the corridor.... I doubt *you* would want to get caught breaking rules now would you?” Hermione pointed out slowly, eyeing AJ’s wand with wide eyes.

“Come on Potter... We both know you’re not going to do this... You can’t... You’re not like that, aren’t you? You and I are not exactly total opposites here...” Hermione said softly, giving AJ a pointed look from where the other Gryffindors were behind her.

AJ’s eyes slowly narrowed in danger, both Draco and Blaise watching her cautiously with tense forms... They knew AJ... They knew her well enough to know that the girl knew a lot of complex spells and didn’t hesitate to use them when needed...

“*Avernus Inflammatory!*” AJ yelled out, pointing her wand directly at them, the bright, glowing red beam of light heading straight for Hermione. Hermione’s eyes widened in panic before she ducked, the beam missing her by a mere inch as it passed by and instead, began heading for the girl directly behind her.

Instantly, Parvati screamed in horror as she hastily ducked out of the way, causing the bright beam to hit the wall behind her, bouncing off until it zoomed out of the window, hitting a nearby tree and instantly causing it to disintegrate into ashes.

Everyone gaped at AJ in horror as AJ herself looked at her own wand in question, her eyes bulging out in alarm and surprise.

“I—I didn’t mean to use t-that spell... I just l-learned it for defense purposes... It just slipped out... I uh—” AJ stuttered, trying to explain it to Blaise, who was just openly gaping at her in shock.

Draco yanked her away from the gaping Gryffindors and glared at her warningly, his silver eyes flashing in panic.

“AJ, I thought we agreed to keep the advance spells you, me and Harry learn to ourselves?! You can’t use spells above our level in public!” He hissed at her, tightening his grip on her arm as AJ winced.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something but before she could, Parvati had rushed forward, screeching in angry indignation as she lunged herself at the raven-haired Slytherin, knocking her to the ground.

AJ eyes widened in surprise as Parvati immediately lunged at her, tackling her and screaming out curse words at the girl beneath her, yanking her hair violently.

Draco had jumped in surprise at what happened, watching in horror and panic before he made to pull the Gryffindor off AJ but Blaise held him back, shaking his head at him.

“Don’t interfere Malfoy... Let AJ handle herself for once...” He said, looking at Parvati just as AJ finally let out an angry screech, shoving Parvati roughly off her and slapping the Gryffindor hard on her cheek, her emerald eyes flashing.

“You stupid bitch! You could have killed me!” Parvati screamed at her, trying to lunge at her again but AJ moved out of the way, picking herself off the ground and turning to face Parvati, her eyes glaring at her through a now wild tangle of raven hair.

“Yeah?! Well, it’s too bad I didn’t, you filthy whore!” AJ screamed back just as the girls met in another struggle, both girls going for the other’s hair and trying to scratch each other’s eyes out.

Hermione watched them with her jaw hanging open as all the other students seem to circle around them, watching the fight in awe and excitement, most of the boys grinning from ear to ear.

“Alright! A catfight!” Seamus had yelled eagerly next to Ron as they joined the crowd, a huge grin on his face as Draco snapped his head up to glare darkly at the other boy, a growl of disgust forming on his handsome face.

“Both of you, stop it! Stop it!” Hermione protested wildly but no one paid her any attention as most of the boys began to cheer loudly, actually urging the two girls on to fight.

“You’re all pigheaded, sexist jerks! This is *not* funny!” Hermione screamed angrily at them just as she glared angrily at Ron and Seamus for joining in, causing her two friends to just shrug in response.

Parvati shoved AJ roughly against the wall, causing the Slytherin to wince in pain and finally allowing Draco to see her now bleeding cheek, almost making him lunge out to help her again if AJ hadn’t scowled angrily and lunged for Parvati again, her eyes glinting.

“Damn you, Patil! Just leave me alone!” She yelled furiously, shoving the other girl away, causing Parvati to stumble painfully to the cold floor.

Eyes glittering evilly, she reached forward and snatched AJ’s ankle, causing AJ’s eyes to widen as she stumbled to the floor as well, grimacing in pain again as Parvati raised a hand and slapped her hard against her bleeding cheek.

“Right, that’s it! I can’t watch this!” Draco snapped angrily, wrenching his arm away from Blaise and immediately yanking the Gryffindor off AJ, immediately causing some of the other boys watching to boo and hiss in disappointment.

“Sod off!” Draco growled at them maliciously, causing them all to flinch at the feared Slytherin’s dark tone of voice and move away instantly. Ron couldn’t help glaring at Draco with anger in his eyes as he watched the blonde help AJ up gently.

AJ yanked her arm away from him; her cheeks flushed in humiliation and pain as she struggled to get up herself but only ended up stumbling back painfully onto the floor, wincing in pain again.

*Please don't help me up.... I can do this myself...* She thought angrily, not sure why but she was angry at Draco for stopping the fight just because she was hurt... It made her feel helpless and weak once again... Like she couldn't handle anything without him or Harry or Blaise helping her out...

Draco shook his head sadly but helped her up again, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her weak body up, supporting her with his own weight as Parvati watched them, her arms crossed over her chest and a smug smile on her face.

"Ms. Patil! Ms. Potter!!" A shriek made them all jump and all the other students to start racing back to the Great Hall in panic just as Prof. McGonagall reached them, looking horrified at the scene.

Parvati scowled darkly at the floor while AJ bowed her head down in absolute shame and humiliation, ashamed at herself for being caught in such a compromising situation.

"Fighting in the corridors! Why, never in my life have I ever seen such unwomanly behavior! As mature young ladies, you are to refrain from such violent acts! I would have never expected *girl* students to be caught fighting like this!" Prof. McGonagall screeched at them, glaring at the two girls, only Ron, Seamus, Draco and Blaise daring to stay with them.

AJ flushed darker, biting her lip as Parvati just remained coldly silent, shooting a glare at the Slytherin beside her. "She started it, Professor! She tried to curse me in the corridor! I was only defending myself!" She said indignantly, glaring at AJ.

Prof. McGonagall could only gape at AJ in disbelief, not daring to believe that one of her favorite students could do such a thing. "Ms. Potter, is this true?" She asked slowly, giving the girl a stern, sharp glare.

AJ just hung her head, not wanting to answer the enraged teacher as the students passing by them in the hall watched them in keen interest, whispering and murmuring to each other.

“Professor, it wasn’t entirely her fault! Parvati here was—”

“I am sure Ms. Potter can very well speak for herself Ms. Granger.” Prof. McGonagall interrupted, causing AJ to look at her in surprise, not at all used to having her rival defend her.

Hermione blushed darkly but nodded, stepping back just as Ron began to shake in anger again, seeing Draco’s arm wrapped around AJ’s slender waist to keep the weak girl standing.

“Yes, professor... It’s true...” AJ mumbled under her breath, not looking Prof. McGonagall in the eye as the woman’s eyes widened in shock, looking at AJ in sad disapproval.

“Very well then... Just for that... 50 points from Slytherin and you will serve detention with me tomorrow. I expected much more from you, Ms. Potter... I guess twins were much more alike than I thought.” Prof. McGonagall said coldly, causing AJ to turn away, not wanting to face Parvati’s smile.

“As for you, Ms. Patil... 20 points from Gryffindor for fighting in the hall. You will also serve detention but not with me but with Prof. Snape. I *never* want to see you both fighting again or I shall deduct more than that.” Prof. McGonagall added sternly, causing Parvati’s smile to falter as Draco and Blaise both shot her an evil sneer, both knowing what Snape did to Gryffindors.

Prof. McGonagall immediately shook her head at them before stalking off, muttering something under her breath as she headed to the Great Hall, leaving the students alone in the corridor.

“See? I was right... You *can’t* handle anything on your own... Look, you can’t even get up without Malfoy there helping you stand up. And *Hermione* here even had to try to bail you out of trouble.” Parvati pointed out when she was gone, giggling at AJ as the other girl’s eyes clouded over and she pulled herself away from Draco, glaring darkly at the Gryffindor.

“Stop it Parvati, come on, let’s go.” Ron urged, trying to shoot AJ a look as he tried to pull the giggling Gryffindor away but AJ had attempted to lunge after her again but Draco held her back, AJ struggling furiously in his arms.

“Let me go, Draco! Let me go, dammit!” AJ screamed at him as she struggled against him, her eyes blazing at Parvati as the Gryffindor easily returned the look, struggling with Ron as well.

“Let her go, Weasley...” A cool, familiar voice suddenly spoke up as they all looked up to see Harry sauntering over to them calmly, a malicious smirk on his face as he watched the scene.

Hermione started in shock when she saw Harry... The warmth in those eyes was gone. There was nothing in there but pure, unadulterated malice and anger... Just like the Slytherin she had known before...

A cold, emotionless mask had been pulled over his handsome face and his hair had been spiked relentlessly and roughly on his head, several strands of his hair glittering silver in the light.

Both AJ and Hermione’s jaw dropped as Ron immediately narrowed his eyes at him, letting Parvati go instantly, the girl stumbling to the floor just as Draco shot Harry a questioning look.

Harry ignored him, offering a hand to Parvati instantly, walking around Hermione coldly as though she was some sort of inanimate object.

“Are you okay, gorgeous? I hope my crazy twin didn’t hurt you... You’re my girl...” Harry said smoothly, flashing the girl a charming, debonair smile as Parvati coyly narrowed her eyes at him in pretend anger, slipping her hand into his just as AJ gasped in insult behind them.

Hermione tensed, her eyes filling with tears of hurt and anger as she watched Harry pull Parvati up easily, the charming, handsome smile never leaving his face, although the smile didn’t seem to reach the coldness in his eyes as he stared at her.

“What do *you* want, Potter? In case you forgot, I’m not *your* girl anymore!” Parvati snapped haughtily, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she narrowed her eyes at him, eyeing him up and down in practiced disdain.

Harry let out a low, sexy and sensual chuckle, a sound that despite being so simple and innocent, had pierced right through Hermione’s chest like a sharp knife twisting over and over again but Harry ignored her, keeping his eyes trained on Parvati.

“Ooh... I’m hurt... Don’t tell me you didn’t miss me, baby... Because I certainly missed *you*...” Harry drawled easily, a cool, seductive smile slowly spreading across his face as Parvati just let out a sound of indignation, rolling her eyes at him.

“We’re *over*, Harry... And if you think I’m just going to forgive you that easily, then you’ve got another thing coming.” Parvati answered slowly, turning away from him but just as she expected, Harry wrapped his strong arms around her waist, pulling her to him.

“I know but I’ve been going crazy, babe... You know I want you... I guess I’ll always want you. Now you just tell me if there’s another guy involved... After all, who could you possibly replace *me* with? You know you want me...” Harry murmured sexily, letting his lips linger on her earlobe.

“Well if that’s true, then why didn’t you come to me sooner?! Why did you have to break up with me?” Parvati demanded angrily, scowling at him in question.

Harry’s eyes clouded over in pain for a minute as he stared at Hermione, who was glaring at him in anger, the tears now freely falling from her face and rolling down her smooth, soft cheeks.

“I was just being stupid... I should have known I could never change... I thought I could go with someone else but she couldn’t satisfy me the way you could, baby...” Harry answered simply, looking directly at Hermione when he did.

“So have you learned your lesson now, then? Are you going to promise me that you’ll behave and be a good boy, now?”

“More than you know baby.... More than you know...” Harry replied enticingly in a whisper, burying his face in the girl’s neck as he answered.

Parvati raised an eyebrow, not totally convinced as she pulled away and glared at him, looking suspicious. “So what are you saying exactly, Harry?” She snapped, flipping her hair over her shoulder again, a smug smile forming on her lips.

Harry slowly quirked his lips into a smirk, the familiar, well-missed action causing Parvati’s knees to weaken as she watched him raise an eyebrow delicately in response. “I’m saying that you and I belong together, Parvati... We’re two of a kind... Two halves of the same person... People like us belong together... Beautiful, sexy and dangerous... Far from innocent.” Harry said, once again holding a hand up to her.

Draco smirked maliciously in agreement from behind him, shooting Hermione, who was trembling in suppressed emotions, a look as AJ’s eyes widened next to him, not daring to believe what was happening.

“If it would please you... Then I apologize for my earlier actions... You know how my pride is... I couldn’t stand being with a girl that was too good to be true.” He drawled again, causing Draco to roll his eyes.

“Oh give me a fucking break...” He muttered under his breath, disgusted by his best friend’s actions.

“Well, that’s true... But don’t think I’m letting you off easy, Harry Potter... You’re going to have to pay big time for your actions...” Parvati purred, wrapping her arms around Harry’s firm physique, silently admiring his well-built form.

Harry flinched slightly at her cold touch, his eyes wandering over to Hermione again, who was now glaring at him with glistening but cold, lifeless eyes, the warm sparkle in those brown orbs now dead and lifeless.

*You brought this on yourself Hermione... We could have gone together but you wanted it to be this way... This is your fault...* Harry



told her silently, shutting his eyes to remove her hurt look from his vision.

“Parvati, will you... Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?” Harry asked her, keeping his voice low and empty of any emotion, looking straight into the other girl’s eyes.

Parvati’s face broke out into an ecstatic smile as she literally threw herself onto him, latching onto him and burying herself in his arms. “Yes! Oh, Harry, yes I will! I wouldn’t go with anyone else but you!” Parvati squealed excitedly as Harry wrapped his arms around her slender form, a slight reluctance in his movements.

Hermione had had enough... Now openly crying, she spun on her heel and bolted off towards the Gryffindor towers, Ron and Seamus trailing after her in confusion as her anguished sobs echoed through the empty corridor.

Harry watched her go over Parvati’s shoulder with a blank, tense expression on his face, confusing himself even more when he suddenly had a sinking feeling that he had just lost something precious in his life because he was suddenly overcome with a strange feeling of emptiness and coldness, his whole body suddenly seeking the comfort only Hermione could give...

*I don’t need her... I don’t need anyone... Not even my sister...* He thought darkly, turning to look at the gaping girl beside Draco, who was giving him a questioning look but Harry ignored her coldly, briefly just nodding at Draco and Blaise before he turned to Parvati again, trying not to look at his twin’s hurt, crestfallen face.

“Hmm... I think we’ve done enough talking, Harry... Why don’t we go and make up for some lost time...” Parvati purred seductively, taking both of Harry’s hands and placing them on her slim waist, her own hands snaking up to his neck to pull his face downwards in a kiss.

Harry found himself automatically responding to her advances and promptly let the girl drag him off to a nearby empty classroom as Draco, Blaise and AJ watched him go, Draco and Blaise looking disgusted and AJ looking at them sadly.

“He still hates me... He would rather help that Gryffindor bitch rather than me... He didn’t even see me bleeding or anything...” AJ said softly in a whisper as Draco turned to her and gently stroked the bruised cheek, flicking his wand over it to heal the cut up instantly.

AJ turned away from him, glaring darkly at the cold floor as Blaise promptly slipped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a comforting hug.

“I can’t believe it... He would rather comfort that...*girl* rather than his own twin sister... Does he really hate me that much? He won’t even look at me...” She mumbled, crying softly against her best friend as Draco watched them, wanting nothing more than to be in Blaise’s place.

“Give him some time AJ... You know how much of a stubborn bastard your brother is, especially in fights... We had a small argument yesterday but I let it go.... I wasn’t in the mood for the silent treatment.” Draco told her, shaking his head.

AJ looked up from Blaise’ shoulder, giving Draco a questioning look. “You guys had an argument? About what?” She asked, hiccupping slightly.

Draco’s eyes flashed angrily as the three Slytherins continued to go to the Great Hall, their footsteps slow and unsteady.

“Nothing important... It’s just that, it’s because of him that I’m going with *Padma Patil* to the Yule Ball now... How ironic he would ask her twin to go with *him*.” He answered, sneering threateningly as several first year Ravenclaws passed them.

AJ’s eyes widened as she stared at Draco, feeling a sinking feeling in her chest as his words. “You’re going with... Padma Patil?” She asked weakly, her voice barely audible, cracking in surprise.

Draco nodded, not seeing the look on AJ’s face as he continued to send his usual glares to the other student in the hall as they made their way to the Slytherin table, all the students making way for them when they saw Draco.

*Well what did you expect?! You 'did' turn him down, AJ... You didn't expect him to wait around for 'you' forever, did you?!* A voice nagged inside her head, causing her to shut her eyes, shaking the thought away.

"Well... Have fun..." She said weakly, managing to give him a feeble smile just as she saw Cedric look up from across the room, giving her a warm, friendly grin before he turned back to his friends, all of them laughing about something.

Draco's face dropped but he nodded wordlessly, ignoring the sad look Blaise was giving them both, shaking his head at their stupidity.

"AJ... Just promise me one thing..." Draco said suddenly, looking intently at the girl, and tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear, not at all minding the current state of disarray her whole mane of hair was.

AJ closed her eyes as Draco gently caressed the cheek that he had healed with a shaking hand, wiping the blood off it with his thumb before leaning over and planting a very gentle, very light kiss on the soft skin, his eyes glittering in desire and longing.

"Save one dance for me?" He whispered, his voice shaking slightly, looking at her intently as AJ opened her eyes, staring at him for a moment, before she quirked one side of her lips into a smile, nodding.

"You got it..." She whispered back before she turned away abruptly again, avoiding his eyes and pulling out of his gentle, tender touch as Blaise cleared his throat beside them, looking slightly amused.

Draco dropped his trembling hand immediately, looking away so AJ couldn't see the hurt look in his eyes again, disgusted at himself for acting his weak.

*Damn her... She keeps pulling away... She's just as stubborn as Harry is... They're both the same...* Draco thought bitterly, turning away as he began piling his plate with food, wanting to distract himself from her.

Seeing the staring third years in front of him, Draco glared darkly at them, letting his sneer break out on his face. "The hell are you all

staring at?! Sod off!” He yelled, slamming his fist against the table, causing the younger students to jump and look away hastily, looking frightened.

*This Ball is going to be hell...* Draco thought before he went back to giving the Gryffindors across the table his usual hateful Malfoy glares, all the Slytherins beside him still proudly wearing their “Harry Potter” badges as he did.

Crabbe and Goyle, who were beside him on his opposite side, flexed their muscles threateningly as Ron and Seamus entered the Hall, this time, without Hermione as they headed over to their table, looking more confused than ever.

Draco shot them a sneer as Ron met his eye across the room, the redheaded immediately tensing in anger as he shot a glare back, his ears turning red in fury. Draco just smirked at him, casually raising a delicate eyebrow before he turned away, rolling his eyes as bitter thoughts and hexes began to run through his mind.

*At least one good thing came out of this... At least Harry's not soft on the mudblood anymore... Though, for once, I don't know which one I prefer, him with Granger or him with Patil...* Draco thought, shuddering in resentment.

Before anything else, he saw a white, snowy owl heading straight for him, causing him to look up immediately and see Harry's owl, Hedwig, looking around wildly for her owner.

Not seeing Harry at the table, Hedwig's eyes lit up in recognition when she saw Draco and immediately swooped down, perching herself on his shoulder as Draco inspected the letter attached to her leg, recognizing Sirius' messy scrawl.

“Hey AJ, it's from Sir—er, I mean, Padfoot...” Draco said, relieving the female owl of her burden as she nipped his finger affectionately, helping herself to some of the juice in his goblet.

AJ looked at him in amazement for a split second.... It seemed to her that Hedwig only trusted those that Harry himself trusted and it was

amazing to see how much the female owl warmed up to those people, as though she could read Harry's emotions...

So far, the only people Hedwig trusted other than Harry was her, Draco and Hagrid himself, since Hagrid was the one who bought Hedwig in the first place... But somehow, AJ had the sneaking suspicion that Hedwig was sort of taking after Harry in a way... Acting like he did...

Hedwig flew over to give AJ a short, gentle nip on the finger as well, cuddling her ear for a minute before she hooted happily and flew out of sight, heading back to the owlery as Draco inspected the letter in his hands.

"You should give it to Harry, Draco..." Blaise pointed out, munching on a muffin as he spoke.

Draco nodded and turned to AJ, fusing his eyebrows together. "Would *you* give it to him? He—"

"I don't think so, Draco. You go find him, I'm staying here." AJ interrupted abruptly, shaking her head at Draco's intention of getting the twins to talk.

Draco sighed, nodding as he got up and walked out of the hall, stuffing the letter into his robes. *Why do I even bother?* He thought as he passed by the Gryffindors, who had all hissed at him as he did, giving him angry resentful glares which he could only return with an amused sneer.

**A/N:** Ugh.. Oh god, was that even worth reading?! Hehe... Well, anyway, I'm sorry if this chapter was too angsty or anything or that the couples going to the Yule Ball seem to be all mismatched... sheepish smile But it will turn out okay in the Yule Ball, I promise. wink Which is coming up next chapter by the way... grin Oh, and anyone want to borrow my **Firebolt**? holds broom up in the air You know, to whack Harry... Because... ARGH!! HARRY!! DIE! DIE!! Hehehe.... Only Harry freakin Potter could hurt his twin, his best friend *and* the love of his life all in one chapter! Grrrah!! Attack!! whacks Harry over the head Argh!! whacks him again and again and

again Harry, you made both Hermione and AJ cry!! Argh!! whack  
Okay, I'll shut up now... **DON'T FORGET TO REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 21- The Christmas Spirit

Harry sighed heavily as he watched the sun begin to rise up early that morning from where he was lying on his back on the grass in the Hogwarts gardens... Right in the exact spot he had left his twin the day they had fought a couple of days ago...

Up until now, he could still hear the heart-wrenching sobs of his sister as he had left her lying there, submitting to his anger and striding back into the castle without a look back at her frail form...

He couldn't bear it... Up until now, those sobs kept haunting him back in his head... It had been the first time he had ever hurt his twin that badly... The first time he had ever hurt *himself* so badly...

And then... He hadn't been satisfied enough... He had to go and take his frustrations out...first, on Draco, then... With a twisting feeling inside his heart, he realized... *Hermione*... He thought, his emerald green eyes clouding over as he turned and rolled over in the grass, disgusted at himself for the things he had been doing recently.

They had all done nothing but haunt him these past few days now... Now... Whenever he had seen Hermione in the Great Hall or in class, she would always look away from him, her eyes cold and hateful almost as if they had never shared anything at all these past few months...

*Almost as if we were still enemies...* Harry realized sadly, his eyes filling with a strong surge of sadness and regret, silently cursing himself for his own recklessness.

*But that was exactly what you wanted didn't you? You 'wanted' to remain enemies with Hermione... You didn't want to admit to yourself that you actually—NO!* Harry interrupted the voice inside his head, shaking the thought away vigorously.

*It was her fault! Why did she have to accept someone else's invitation?! Why couldn't she have just said yes to 'me', even if she already promised someone else?!* Harry shouted silently at the sky, feeling another surge of anger well up inside him.

The answer came in three very different but very familiar voices... All of which caused another great pang of blame and shame to wrench upon his gut.

*"Not everything is about 'you', Harry! Can you for once think about others for a change?!"*

Harry winced to himself at the harshness of all three tones, remembering how hurt his twin sister, his best friend and most of all... *Hermione* had looked when they had all said this... And he, being as stubborn as he was, just did not *want* to listen...

Maybe he *had* been selfish at the time... Maybe he had been selfish to think that *Hermione* would just wait around forever for him... Like some sort of puppy waiting around for her master to call her to him...

*Hermione* was certainly never like that... She never was like any of the girls Harry had dated before... She was much more different.. Special... And it was exactly the way she was that made Harry seem to admire her so much...

*She's strong... Brave... Noble... And most of all, 'loyal'... Everything I'm not...* Harry thought bitterly, feeling a familiar stinging in the corners of his eyes but he held his tears back, not wanting to break down.

*I guess I don't deserve her... She deserves to be with someone to treat her right... To treat her the way she deserves to be treated... Not at all like the way I've treated her... Like some mere challenge I had to win to prove myself...* Harry thought, shaking his head.

*But I just want her... So badly... It hurts...* Harry thought, finally losing it as the tears began to fall down his cheeks now, looking up at the sky as it seemed to blur slightly with the tears in his eyes.

Words could not describe what Harry had felt when *Hermione* had turned her beautiful, shiny brown eyes towards him, eyes so open and sincere... Eyes so honest... And had downright *rejected* his invitation because, *someone else* had asked her to the ball...



*Pain... Humiliation... Rejection...* It was something Harry had never once experienced before all at the same time and he didn't know how to react to such a feeling besides anger... Anger and frustration... Fury...

Blinding jealousy... Just the thought of Hermione in the arms of another was more than Harry could stand... It just wasn't right... Hermione was supposed to be with him... It seemed as though she belonged with no one else except him...

*But you treated her like dirt when she 'was' with you, didn't you Potter? Made it worse by going with Patil again didn't you?* The cold, angry voice inside his head snapped again but instead of fighting it however, Harry just bowed his head in defeat, sighing to himself.

He didn't know why he had done it... But after everything that had happened... It seemed as if some kind of different rage had taken control of his entire self and he wanted nothing more than to hurt those who had hurt him...

Get them back for making him feel so betrayed and making him feel so abandoned... He wanted to show them all that he could fight back... And he did.... And somehow, instead of feeling triumphant, he just felt as though he had lost himself even more than he had started with....

*I blew it... Big time... I deserve to feel this pain... I deserve to be alone...* Harry thought, the tears cascading down continuously down his pale cheeks as he got up into a sitting position and looked up at the sky as the sun cast a beautiful orange glow in it.

These past few days had been like hell... AJ seemed to be avoiding him at all costs, spending most of her time studying alone or simply just making up the worst excuses just to leave while even Draco seemed pissed at him, not having spoken much to him ever since he gave Harry that letter from Sirius about the first task.

The thing that had hurt most was seeing Hermione, yet not being able to reach out and touch her... To feel her soft skin or to kiss her soft lips once again... It seemed as though every time he saw her, every

inch of his body seemed to fill with a sad sense of longing and guilt that tore him up inside.

He had hidden it very well of course, only masking his hurt and his pain with his usual sneer of malice but he knew that as much as he could fool everyone else with that mask, he could never fool himself into believing that he didn't care about Hermione...

He couldn't even remember when he had gotten a decent sleep without having to see Hermione's beautiful tear-streaked face in his mind again and again the night he had hurt her and hearing her sobs as she ran away from him and Parvati...

He knew now that he had never wanted to hurt Hermione like that... He knew that if it wasn't for his and Draco's bet, he probably never would have gotten involve with Hermione at all but now that he did... He... He couldn't seem to let her go... He didn't want to...

Now, to him, she meant much more than just a measly challenge.... Harry couldn't explain it but he knew that he definitely felt something for her...And the more he tried to deny it, the more it seemed to push itself onto him...

He had never felt this way about anyone in his entire life... Not even AJ, whom he loved much more than his own self... No... Somehow, Harry knew that the kind of feeling he felt for Hermione was somehow as strong as the love he felt for his twin but it was a different feeling altogether.

Over the months he and Hermione had spent together, he had learned so much from her that he had never learned with the other girls he had been with all put together... Hermione was strong... Independent... Courageous... Beautiful and most of all... She was... *sincere*... She seemed much more *real* than the others...

*And I've let her slip through my fingers for the biggest slut in Gryffindor...* Harry thought angrily, punching the grass with his fist in frustration, not even registering the pain as he did.

He didn't even know why he had gone with Parvati... She had just been at the right place at the right time and somehow, he knew that in

going with Parvati, he could repay Hermione for the hurt she had caused him it had backfired and he ended up hurting himself in the process.

Parvati meant absolutely nothing to him... Harry knew she could satisfy nothing more of his than his lust... He felt cold and empty with her... Nothing at all compared to the wonderful feeling he felt with Hermione...

With Hermione, he knew he could be himself... He could act the way he wanted to... With Hermione, he felt free... And over the times they had spent together, Harry somehow knew that he could never... *Never* live his life the way he did before because...

*Hermione's not in it...* Harry realized miserably, feeling his eyes well up in tears again but he wiped them away angrily, hating himself for not realizing this sooner.

Now, thanks to her, there was an even deeper, *stronger* feeling inside him that needed to be satisfied, much more than his lust ever did... He needed to satisfy his *love*... And he knew, only Hermione owned that certain spot in his heart so only she had the power to satisfy this feeling...

Harry's eyes widened as he registered his own thoughts in his head... *So it's true then... I do love her... I love Hermione Granger...* He thought, his face finally lighting up in realization and his eyes sparkling in understanding.

It all made sense... How only Hermione could make his heart pound rapidly in his chest... How only she could make him laugh in a sincere, affectionate manner... How only she could somehow make his face brighten up just by offering him a single smile...

It all explained why he had been feeling this way these past days... It was absolute torture seeing the person you love glare back at you with nothing but hate and loathing in her eyes...

Though he knew that he deserved to be treated that way after what he had done to her, every time he realized that Hermione would

never again look directly at him with her beautiful brown eyes, it had been like a scar burnt right through his chest...

Harry knew that if he had the strength and the bravery to push his pride aside and look past those hateful brown orbs, he would see the hurt in her eyes... The hurt which had been the main cause why there was no more twinkle in them and why there was no more life reflected in those orbs...

The hurt which *he* himself had been careless enough to cause... The hurt *he* had put in there ever so willingly just because he couldn't bear the thought of being rejected for another...

*Damn my pride...* Harry yelled angrily at himself, clenching his hands into fists again.

He knew that Hermione had never wanted to reject him... No... She was never like *he* ever was... She wasn't a coward to admit her feelings... In fact, she had almost admitted how she felt to him that night in the Quidditch pitch if only Harry hadn't stopped her from saying it out loud...

*Another stupid mistake once again I have caused.* Harry added bitterly, sneering at his own self.

Harry knew Hermione had felt the same about him... *Had...* He wasn't so sure if she still did right now after all the pain he had caused her to suffer... But he knew that she *did* care for him... She wasn't afraid to show it in herself... In her eyes and actions...

And Harry knew... He knew that she had been telling the truth when she had said that someone else had told her he had already asked another girl to the Yule Ball... Hermione never was good with lying... Her eyes bared nothing but truth and sincerity...

*Ever the Gryffindor...* Harry thought sarcastically, a fond smile on his face as he thought of her.

But even though he had known it wasn't Hermione's fault that they couldn't go to the Yule Ball together, Harry showed once again the

stubbornness found only in a Slytherin by simply refusing to see the truth, not wanting to admit to himself he was wrong.

*I am a selfish, self-centered bastard...* Harry thought, smirking bitterly once again at his own self-mockery.

She didn't deserve to be treated that way... She had never deserved to be hurt or to be blamed because it was never her fault... Harry had simply just chosen to remain blind enough to not see the truth...

*Such a beautiful person deserves nothing more than to be loved... She deserves someone worthy of her... Someone as pure and innocent as she is... Not a jerk like me...* Harry thought, sighing heavily.

*Jerks like me deserve dirty, nasty girls who would leave us easily for another pretty face if given the chance... We don't deserve anyone special for all the things we've done... 'I' don't deserve Hermione for all the things I've done...* Harry thought.

*Maybe I do deserve to be with that slut, Patil... I'm exactly the same as she is... Perhaps even worse...* Harry thought again, running a hand through his hair.

But now... As he finally admitted to himself that he did love Hermione... Instead of feeling a light, bubbly feeling everyone would expect to feel when they were in love, he only felt himself feeling worse...

*I was stupid enough to hurt the only girl I've ever learned to love this much... Way to go Potter... You've proven yourself a true Slytherin once again...* He thought sarcastically, dropping his head onto his knees and shutting his eyes in complete remorse.

"Harry?"

Harry's breathing hitched in his throat as he recognized the voice of his twin sister, whom he hadn't noticed walking up to sit beside him, her eyes not focused on him but instead on the stretch of blue and orange sky above them.

Harry didn't answer but just looked at her form intently, his teary eyes widening slightly in surprise. Finally seeing his twin up this close again, he finally noticed that there were dark circles under her dull, lifeless green eyes and that her skin was paler than usual.

Her hair wasn't clipped back neatly behind as she usually had it done in mornings during classes, leaving it free to frame her face, a dark, miserable look on her delicate features.

He couldn't help notice that despite having the dark circles under her normally sparkling eyes, they were also swollen red as though she had been up all night crying, looking terribly as exhausted as he himself felt.

In fact, AJ looked as miserable as he felt... Though he couldn't be too sure since this had been the first time he had seen her close for a number of days now... She hadn't talked to him before, seeming to avoid him, Blaise *and* Draco all at the same time, spending her time alone.

But her appearance wasn't what had surprised him... It was the fact that she had actually gotten up this early at the crack of morning. Though he wasn't a morning person himself, Harry had been awake all night, tossing and turning in his sleep so he decided to just go off somewhere to think and figure things out...

Obviously, he had done right... He *did* manage to sort out all and everything he had been feeling lately but it had only made him feel much worse than he felt before... He now knew things about himself that he wished he hadn't in the first place...

After a long, peaceful moment of silence between them, Harry finally spoke up, breaking his dazed twin out of her trance. "Couldn't sleep too huh?" He asked lightly, turning around to face her, catching the look of mild surprise on her tired, weary face.

"How could you tell?" She asked weakly, her voice barely above a whisper as she managed to crack a smile at him in response.

Harry winced at the tone of her voice, immediately deciding that he had in fact been right about his sister crying all night... Her voice was light and rough... Obviously, she had a rough week as well...

"Easy... I've known you for 14 years... You never wake up this early." Harry answered softly, quirking the corner of his lips into a gentle smile. AJ managed a weak laugh for a moment before she sighed heavily and turned away, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she stared off into space.

"I didn't expect to find you coming back here... After..." Harry's voice trailed off as he turned away from her as well, the harsh memory causing his heart to clench painfully.

Fortunately, AJ just nodded, still not looking at him as she reached out and gingerly picked up a small trampled flower on the ground, caressing it gently with her fingers. "It's amazing isn't it?" She whispered, gently putting the simple flower to her face and sniffing its delicate scent, closing her eyes as she did.

"What is?" Harry asked, watching with a blank stare as AJ let out a small, bitter smile again before putting the beautiful, yet trampled flower into her hair.

"How we go looking for the most beautiful things in the wrong places when... When we could have made our lives easier if only we had seen how beautiful the things beside us are already..." She whispered, her eyes glazing over in bitter tears once again.

Harry didn't say anything to this, knowing full well that AJ had just said something about her own problems, not just theirs... He didn't want to interfere with her anymore... He had hurt her too much the last time he tried fighting against it... The two remained silent for a long period of time, listening intently to the calming rhythm of the other's breathing and each one waiting for the other to speak up first.

Harry forced himself to remember... The last time they had been there... They had exchanged nothing else but anger and hatred at each other... Taking out their own frustrations and problems on one another as twins usually do...

Now that most of that anger had already been calmed, there was nothing left inside them but guilt, misery and loneliness, having spent all their efforts on the useless anger they themselves had built up in the first place.

Now that Harry had had a lot of time to think things over... His head had finally cleared up... He could think clearly now... Anger, hatred and confusion wasn't fogging up his brain anymore and for that, he was thankful for... But he had hurt so much people in the process...

He didn't think he could ever care much about them but what people needed to know about him was that Harry was very protective of the ones he cared about in his life, even if he was nasty to everyone else.

Despite being a jerk, a playboy, a bully or whatever they liked to call him, he made sure that he was still a good person to the people he cared about... A good brother... A good best friend and a... A good *boyfriend*?

The term 'boyfriend' seemed to make him wince, causing him to widen his eyes at the humorous thought. Never once had he ever considered becoming a loyal boyfriend to *any* girl... He thought he was strong enough to never fall for anyone but he guessed he was wrong...

Maybe some time to himself was all he ever really needed... Maybe it was what they all needed... He of all people, knew very well what he could do when his anger was at full blast... it seemed to take control of his entire body and he found he could not control his impulses when that happened, obeying only the anger inside him...

It was something he had developed after living with the Dursleys for so long all his life... Perhaps it was their fault too... The Dursleys had never shown any amount of love, affection or care towards the twins so they hardly knew much about how to handle it in front of other people...

Maybe that was the reason they were so messed up with everything lately... Maybe that was the reason *he* was so messed up about everything lately... He had never known and had never handled such a situation until now...



Harry was snapped right out of his thoughts AJ turned her back towards him so he couldn't see her shaking with sobs again, her breathing irregular as she tried to hold back the sobs from escaping her.

"H-Harry... I-I'm sorry..." She whispered, biting her lip as tears began falling down her cheeks again, surprising her even more whereas how she could possibly have any more tears left after everything that has happened.

Harry didn't respond once again, just watching his twin closely as she sniffed and turned back to face him, wiping the tears away angrily as she did.

"I'm sorry for all those things I've said to you... I didn't mean them, I swear... Everything just got completely out of control and it all came tumbling out... I'm so sorry..." She stuttered, her shoulders trembling as she cried openly now, looking at him pleadingly.

Harry watched her with a serious look on his face, biting his lip as he turned away again. "Yes you did... You meant them...AJ... I know you did.... Every word..." He whispered, his eyes fluttering shut in pain.

AJ couldn't respond, breathing very heavily as she tried to prevent any more tears from falling, her whole form trembling with sobs.

"I-I... I didn't, I—"

"Yes you did... Apparently, this has been on your mind for months now, otherwise, you wouldn't have released them all out at the same time... it seems it's been bothering you for a long time already..." Harry spoke very softly but with a firm yet gentle tone of voice, this time meeting her gaze.

"H-Harry... I-I'm sorry, I—"

"AJ, please... *don't* say sorry... You shouldn't... *Don't* apologize to me anymore..." Harry interrupted again, holding a hand up to stop the crying girl from speaking.

AJ shut her mouth but looked at him with an almost desperate, pleading expression, straining wildly to keep the tears in her eyes as she watched him with a blurred vision.

“You had... You had every right to say those things to me...” Harry admitted shakily, now feeling his dried eyes tearing up once again but he refused to cry once more, forcing himself to be stronger than that.

AJ looked at him in shock, her teary eyes widening slightly. “What? Harry but—”

“I deserved it... I deserved each and every word you threw at me that day... Frankly because you’re right... I... I was treating you like a child... I was... I was controlling your life unfairly...” Harry whispered, looking down as one tear managed to escape his eyes and crawled slowly down his cheek.

This time, AJ was the one who kept silent, watching him very closely as Harry finally looked up, his eyes glistening with unmistakably tears and his face twisted into a pained grimace.

Her heart wrenched itself painfully as her brother lost all his sense of speech, finally stuttering his words out, trying in vain to get them out of his shaking form as he dared to speak the words he had kept from her for so long.

“I-I j-just..... I j-j-just d-didn’t want t-to lose you yet, AJ.... I-I wasn’t ready t-to... give you u-up... I d-didn’t want t-to...L-let go... I c-c-couldn’t let go... I *couldn’t*...” Harry spluttered out, crying out loud now as he collapsed into her arms, finally spilling out everything he had kept pent up for the past days... Spilling it all out in the arms of his twin, who just sat there, hugging him tightly, her own tears falling.

“I-I’m sorry... I-I’m so s-s-sorry... I-I’m—” Harry tried to speak out, sobbing too much to speak the words out properly.

“Shh... I know...” AJ whispered softly, gently running her hand through his hair to comfort him as his sobs increased, muffled as he buried himself deeper into her comforting embrace.

AJ shook with her own emotions but she tried to force them away, force them away for her twin as she tightened her arms around his trembling body, his soft, anguished sobs piercing right through her heart like a knife.

It was during this very moment that she remembered when they were only 6 years old...When Harry had first been punished by their Aunt Petunia using a leather belt to hit him, causing a number of bruises to appear on his frail body then...

AJ had watched the scene from the doorway, crying as she heard her twin's loud cries of pain over and over again and when the punishment was over, Harry had just ran out and rushed into her arms, crying loudly like the little boy he was... His whole bruised body shaking with fear...

Now... it was almost as if it was that time all over again, hearing Harry's sobs reminded her of how he cried before as a little boy... Not afraid to let out his emotions or of people seeing him cry... Not afraid to show his feelings...

It seemed he never cried anymore now if he could help it... Almost as if he had built a wall around himself to prevent him from feeling any more emotion and to prevent him from feeling any more pain, whether physical or emotional... A cold, nasty hard-hearted Slytherin.

But now... This was the first time, ever since that incident that Harry had cried this loudly once again... And once again, it had been in her arms, both of them showing each other the bond and the understanding that they knew no one else could ever replace between them...

Frankly, if anyone had walked in on them right now, they would have been surprised to see Harry allow himself to cry this much like a little child... He had never shown his sensitive side if he could help it... But all that didn't seem to matter at that moment...

What only mattered was that he was there, in his twin's comforting embrace... The two of them being the only ones that seemed to exist within that very moment... Nothing else mattered at that very

moment... Just being with each other was enough for now... That was all they needed...

Though most people would seem to doubt it, they shared a very special bond only twins could understand... Even no words were necessary to speak as they understood each other's emotions vividly... That was why it had been so painful when they had exchanged such harsh words before...

AJ didn't say or do anything else except stroke her twin's back comfortingly, rocking him back and forth as he just continued to cry against her, releasing every single ounce of energy and emotion he had inside him.

After a long moment, Harry's shaky sobs seemed to subside weakly but he didn't lift his face up, just hugging her tightly as though he was almost afraid to let go of her, afraid of losing her once he did.

AJ didn't pull away either, just hugging him back the same way, waiting until his form had stopped shaking and waiting until his breathing had returned to normal before she would dare to say anything.

Finally, after what seemed like a long moment, Harry forced himself to pull away, hiccupping slightly as he wiped his now swollen eyes, refusing to let go of the hand he had locked into her own.

AJ gave his hand a comforting squeeze, causing Harry to look at her and give her a small but shaky, lopsided smile, as she herself wiped her tears away, taking a deep breath.

"Harry... I'm only going to say this once, so listen very carefully okay?" She asked him, meeting his emerald eyes with her own, a firm yet loving look on her face.

Harry nodded in reply, too weak and his voice too hoarse now to manage a reply to her.

"No matter what happens... No matter who the people are that enter our lives... You will always be my twin brother... my one true best

friend...*Always*... Nothing and certainly *no one* can ever change that..." She told him, giving him a small smile.

Harry snorted in amusement but quirked his lips into another shaky grin, both sarcasm and affection shining in his eyes. "That sounded way too mushy for my liking, AJ..." He kidded lightly, causing AJ to manage a weak laugh in response.

Then her expression turned serious as she tightened her hand around his, forcing him to look back into her eyes again. "I will *always* be by your side...I've *always* been on your side... I will *always* love you in a way I love no one else and no one can ever take me away from you, Harry... You don't have to be protective of something you will always have..." She said softly.

Harry nodded, sighing heavily as he turned away from her. "I was just afraid of losing you... That was why I treated you like a baby all these years... I figured if I did that... Then I could be sure you would never leave me to go with some guy or something..." He admitted.

AJ made a face, managing to get a feeble laugh from her twin as she shook her head firmly at his tone of voice.

"I wouldn't care if that guy was as handsome as Gilderoy Lockhart, you could *never* lose me, Harry... But you have to understand that I need my own life now... Having my own life doesn't mean I'm straying myself away from you... It only means walking my own path but *with* you still there beside me walking your own path as well... Nothing will change between us... You just have to let me go so that I can stand on my own, that's all..." AJ explained, sighing.

"I know... But that was what I was afraid of... *Letting you go*... I couldn't bear that thought... That was why I exploded... I was angry at you for wanting to be independent... I know now I was wrong..." Harry finally said, giving an anguished sigh.

"We both were, Harry... I *do* need you to help me with my life... But... Just help, Harry... I can control it myself... Besides, no matter what happens between us, you will always be my very handsome, adorable and absolutely annoying older brother!" AJ finished,

reaching forward and pinching his cheek playfully, causing Harry to make a face, rolling his eyes at her.

Harry grabbed the offending hand and squeezed it tightly again, giving her a genuine smile. "You mean that?" He asked softly.

AJ's face softened as she looked at him, giving him another smile before she leaned forward and enveloped him in another tight hug, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Of course I do... I love you, Harry. And the way I love you will always be special in a way like I love no one else. I promise, we will always have each other." She said, pulling back and offering her hand.

Harry looked at it in confusion for a minute before he let out a grin and took it, both of them executing the handshake they had come to master since childhood and ending it by bonking their fists lightly on the other's scar, smiling at each other as they did.

"I guess I've been really selfish huh?" Harry asked, giving her a wry smile.

AJ raised an eyebrow, looking at him curiously. "Why would you say that?" She asked, looking confused.

Harry ran another hand through his hair, sighing heavily in response. "Because... All this time I've been scaring off all the guys who like you.... I've wanted to keep your love all to myself when... When *others* needed it too..." He concluded, his eyes glazing over for a minute in thought.

AJ didn't answer, looking away and gazing intently at the now new morning sky in front of them, watching as several birds flew around them peacefully. "Harry, can I ask you something?" She asked, a slightly worried look on her face as she looked back at him.

Harry smirked, rolling his eyes at her in response. "You just did, you big ugly git." He answered sarcastically as AJ laughed in spite of herself, rolling her eyes as well.

“Do you... Do you *love*... Parvati Patil?” She asked, her voice dripping with disgust and suspicion.

Harry’s eyes instantly blazed in anger as he shook his head hastily, his handsome face suddenly twisting into a hideous snarl. “No. I never had, never will.” He answered coldly, cracking an angry sneer as he finally realized that he would have to go through the entire Yule Ball with her as his date.

AJ looked visibly relieved but she looked at him in question again, raising an eyebrow at his sudden change of expression. “Then... Why did you ask her?” She asked again, not wanting to press him for information as she kept her tone gentle and understanding.

She knew how angry and how stubborn her brother was when people nosed around in his business and he certainly did not want to start another argument, especially since they had just made up.

Harry’s eyes flashed again but he answered in a firm and truthful tone of voice. “Because... The... Girl I meant to ask already turned me down for someone else...” He answered bitterly yet with a tone of sadness in his voice, turning away.

AJ’s eyes clouded over sadly for a minute at the thought of another girl in her brother’s life but then she realized that was exactly the feeling Harry had been telling her all along, and she knew she had to accept that he had a right as well... *No matter who this girl is...* AJ thought, looking away into the sky once again.

“Do you love her?”

Harry winced at the question she had just asked, biting his lip as he struggled to keep the answer from coming out but he found that after everything else, he couldn’t fight the truth back anymore.

“...Yes...” He answered softly, finally sighing in defeat as he buried his face in his hands, shutting his eyes in thought.

AJ looked up, looking both surprised and sad at the same time at the bluntness of her twin’s words but she forced herself to give a small smile, nodding at him.

*So he's finally paying for all those other girl's he made fall for him... Now, he's fallen for one himself... Who would have thought... I knew somehow he was bound to meet his match sooner or later...* She thought in mild amusement.

Though Harry had kept repeating to them all that he would never fall in love, AJ knew that one day, he would somehow eat his words... After all... Even a Slytherin was human... Anyone could fall in love... Even the biggest jerk in school...

And it seemed amusing to her that after all those years of breaking girls' hearts and leaving them weak and broken, now he's finally getting back all the pain and all the heartbreak he's sent out...

"Aren't you going to tell me who was strong enough managed to break through that ice cold heart of yours?" AJ asked weakly, trying to be happy for him as she forced a smile, curious on whom he had fallen for.

But Harry only shook his head in reply, not meeting her eyes as he answered her blankly. "I can't... Tell you yet, AJ... I can't tell anyone yet about how I feel for her... Not even her... I just can't... You understand right?" Harry asked, looking up at her pleadingly.

AJ frowned slightly at not finding out who she was but nodded nonetheless, sighing. "Of course I do, Harry..." She answered, barely audible.

After another long moment of silence, she looked up, forcing a teasing grin onto her face. "So... You're completely whipped now, huh?" She asked, smirking.

"Shut the *fuck* up, AJ!" Harry had suddenly snapped, raising his voice in anger, causing AJ to jump up in surprise, startled by his reaction.

They met each other's gazes for a minute- AJ's wide and in shock at his sudden act of anger and Harry's furious and angry, his face burning. Harry turned away furiously, his emerald eyes flashing at her implied taunt but AJ finally snapped out of her trance and gently rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it slightly as she did.



“Hey... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, Harry... I was just playing around...” She whispered softly, looking guilty.

Harry didn’t reply, still looking a bit angry but nodded, his eyes glazed over and emotionless. “I’m sorry too, I didn’t mean to snap at you... It’s just... I don’t want to talk about this, okay? It’s just a really painful subject for me...” He mumbled, clenching his hands into fists.

AJ nodded in agreement, studying him intently as Harry hastily wiped his eyes again and turned to her, giving her a serious look as well.

“AJ... I’ve been meaning to ask you something as well... Although... If you decide to answer it, I want the truth, okay?” Harry asked, meeting her eyes with his.

AJ raised an eyebrow but nodded, curious to what his question might be. “Okay Harry... What is it?”

Harry hesitated for a minute before he took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, giving her a smile. “AJ... I saw the way you looked at Draco when you turned him down that day in the Great Hall...” He began slowly, waiting for her to react but AJ had barely reacted at all, keeping her face calm and neutral.

“Do you... Do you feel anything for him?” Harry asked reluctantly, curious yet at the same time dreading the answer that was to come out of his twin’s mouth, fearing what he might find out.

He was surprised when AJ didn’t say anything at all just nodding silently, staring off into space with a glazed look, not bothering to say anything to deny or to affirm his question.

Harry felt his heart sink in his chest at the simple gesture, feeling a heavy, overwhelming feeling of sadness fill up inside him as he thought of his sister loving anyone else besides him.

He knew it was something that was bound to happen sooner or later... He himself had known it would come whether he allowed it to or not... And... *I’m happy for her... I am... It just hurts still...* He thought, sighing.

“Well... Then... Did you tell him?” He forced out, his eyes glinting with tears half because of sadness and half because of joy, managing to force out a shaky smile for her as he did.

AJ this time shook her head hard, still not looking at him as she took off the flower in her hair and examined it closely, playing with its soft petals. “Why not?” Harry asked in concern, fusing his eyebrows together at her.

AJ sighed, setting the flower down and finally met his gaze, finally allowing him to see the confused and scared look in her eyes. “I don’t know, Harry... I’m... *scared* if I told him that... I’m afraid of the consequences... How he might reject me... Or hurt me... Or even worse, run away from me...” She admitted, bowing her head down in shame.

*Well... If my own love life sucks, the least I could do is fix hers...* Harry finally thought, looking at his twin with an intense expression on his face.

“AJ, he would never do that... I happen to know that Draco would never run away from you... Or hurt you... Or reject you...” He said truthfully, finally intent on informing his sister what they had made sure she had never noticed for years.

AJ looked up at him, looking confused and hopeful at the same time. “What do you mean, Harry? How could you know this?” She asked doubtfully, raising an eyebrow.

Harry finally shut his eyes in defeat, turning away from his sister as he finally let the out the words Draco had admitted to feeling for AJ to him in the Great Hall several days before.

“Because... AJ... Draco, he... He *loves* you...” He said softly, his voice a harsh whisper as he failed to notice the shocked look on his twin’s face as she gripped his chin and forced his gaze back to meet hers.

“Why would you say such a thing?” AJ hissed angrily, her eyes half-hopeful and half-denying, as though she wanted to believe him but was scared to do so as well.

Harry opened his eyes again and gave her a calm look, raising an eyebrow at her own stubbornness. "I just know okay? It's pretty obvious... Both Blaise and I noticed the way Draco looks at you... He loves you, AJ... I can tell... Almost as much as I do." Harry told her, giving her a pointed look which AJ promptly ignored.

"I don't care what you think, Harry... I need to hear this from his own lips... I won't believe anything just because you assume it to be that way... Besides... I'm not sure if I'm ready to admit to myself how I feel for him yet..." She admitted, stubbornly looking away.

Harry looked at her as though she was insane, his eyes widening in shock. "Why the *fuck* not? You just admitted to me right now that you feel—"

"Because he's not the type of guy I wanted to fall for! I don't know why but I did! And now... Now, I'm scared of all the possible things he's capable of doing because..." AJ struggled to find the right words to say but Harry seemed to understand.

"Because... He's capable of hurting you? Because he's just like I am? A cruel, heartless Slytherin jerk?" Harry asked softly, giving her a sardonic smirk.

AJ laughed weakly again but nodded sadly, shaking her head.

"All this time, I thought I wanted this one other guy because of who he was... I never found myself liking the bad boys... The ones who would leave without a trace if they felt like it... I wanted to fall for one of the good guys... I'm afraid of getting involved with Draco and then having him hurt me as he did those other girls..." She explained, biting her lip.

"He would *never*—"

"How can you be so sure of that, Harry?" AJ challenged, her eyes flashing for a minute as she glared at him.

"Because... I'm not his best friend for anything, AJ... Once Draco's made up his mind about his feelings for a person, it stays there no matter what... The guy hasn't even been with any other girl this whole

year... He's probably the only Slytherin I know who's noble enough to stand by his words... He's completely loyal to the people he respects and cares about. Trust me..." Harry said, feeling his chest getting heavier by the minute.

"But—"

"AJ... It was already pretty obvious... I just never told you because I was afraid you would love him more than you love me..." Harry told her softly, sighing in defeat.

AJ refused to comment anymore, just looking back onto the sky and resting her head on his shoulder, staring off into space once again, looking deep in her thoughts.

Harry took her lead and rested his own head over hers, plunging into thoughts of his own, thinking about his own life... And how much he suddenly missed having Hermione with him...

What he wouldn't give at that very moment to have her body close to his right now... To be able to wrap his arms once again around her slender waist... To claim her lips with his own and to see her beautiful, bright smile directed at him once again...

Not that horrible, heart-piercing, lifeless and most of all, *haunting* look she seemed to give him now every time they met each other's gaze, which all week long, Harry had kept meeting with a sneer on his face, refusing to see the truth.

These past few days without her had been like hell... What was worse, Harry had to endure all of Parvati's whiny pleas and annoying advances on him as she had once again reappointed herself as his girlfriend and had begun announcing proudly to everyone else that they were back together.

Harry, being the Slytherin that he was, had not tried to stop her, hoping that if she did spread all those lies, it would make Hermione come to her senses and beg for his forgiveness but she had not even reacted, not seeming to care at all.

And as much as he tried to hide that, the fact that Hermione could carry on about her classes and her schedules without a second thought of him had stung him deeply...

*I'm such a fool... I didn't realize how important she was to me until I... Until I lost her... I want her back... Oh god, what I wouldn't do to just have her back... She was the only girl I had ever learned to care about... The only girl I 'actually' cared about and yet she was the one I had let go...* He scolded himself, shaking his head.

*Screw Parvati... Screw all those other girls... I don't want anyone else but Hermione...* Harry thought, feeling another stinging in the corner of his eyes but he refused to cry anymore... He was far more exhausted for that...

*Well it's too late for that now thanks to you, Potter...* A cold, sarcastic voice hissed inside his head, squeezing out any feeling of hope that he had left for himself.

Harry opened his mouth to say something but an idea suddenly lit up in his head and his eyes suddenly sparkled in realization as he shot up immediately, surprising his twin as he did and causing her to stumble to the ground.

"Ow! Merlin's beard, Harry! What's wrong?" AJ complained, looking up at him in annoyance as Harry gave her a grin, suddenly feeling a lot better and positive than he had in days now that he and his twin were on speaking terms again.

Harry offered her a hand to help her stand back up, giving her a smile. "Hey... Today is Hogsmeade weekend right?" He asked suddenly, fusing his eyebrows together in thought.

AJ raised an eyebrow skeptically but nodded in agreement, dusting the back of her robes as she stood up beside him. "So it is... Why? You want to go down to Hogsmeade?" She asked as Harry began straightening his robes, wiping his eyes to make sure no one else would notice he had been crying.

He nodded, giving her a lopsided grin in response. "You want to go with me? We can spend the entire day together... Just the two of us... You know, to get started on our Christmas shopping." He said, winking.

AJ's eyes sparkled as she smiled back, squeezing his hand in response. "Just the two of us? Like we used to before when we were kids?" She asked softly.

Harry nodded, knowing full well that this would be one of the last times he could be with his sister before she got involved with other guys... He planned to make full use of it... It could help him with his problem with Hermione as well...

"Yup... Just the two of us... Call it a bonding session and besides, I need you to help me pick out my tux for the Yule Ball." He added, winking again, this time mischievously.

AJ's eyes narrowed in confusion immediately at his words. "Tux?! But I thought the Yule Ball would require us to go in *dress robes*, not tuxedos and gowns..." She asked, looking confused.

Harry raised an eyebrow at her, obviously amused. "Weren't you listening to what Prof. Snape told us weeks ago? You know Beauxbatons... Those snobs specifically requested that the theme be formal so they informed us ahead of time for us to look for our attire." He told her, sniggering.

"Oh..." AJ muttered stupidly, embarrassed at having been caught not listening in class before Harry yanked on her arm again, dragging her back towards the castle. Just as they had reached the entrance, Harry turned to look back at his twin, giving her a small smile as he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear for her.

"AJ?"

AJ looked at him in surprise, fusing her eyebrows together as Harry leaned in and gave her another tight, affectionate embrace, resting his head on her shoulder as he did. "What was that for?" She asked, laughing lightly as they pulled back and grinned at one another.

“For just... For just being there for me... Despite all this shit I caused you.... I love you... I always will... Thanks for understanding me again... And for... For just listening... I needed to release all that emotion for weeks now... Thank you...” He whispered, kissing her on her scar

AJ grinned and kissed his scar back in response, her eyes twinkling in affection once again. “Thank *you* Harry... Thank you for finally letting go... I love you too...*jerk-face*.” She replied, laughing as Harry ruffled her hair in annoyance before slinging an arm around her shoulders and leading her out towards the village.

Harry groaned as someone shook him awake Christmas morning, causing him to grumble something under his breath and bury his head deeper into the covers. A pair of small, persistent hands shook him again, causing him to finally wrench his eyes open, squinting up at his offender.

Humongous green eyes peered right back down at him, causing him to jump in surprise from his bed, tumbling down noisily onto the cold floor with a loud thud. “Damn!” He cursed loudly, causing the other Slytherin boys in the dorms room to jump awake in surprise again, immediately bolting up from their beds and looking around the room frantically.

Hearing a familiar squeaky voice, Harry held back a groan and looked up to see Dobby peering down at him nervously, biting his nails as he took in the annoyed, sleepy expression on the young Slytherin’s face.

“Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter sir! Dobby is not wanting to startle you... He only wishes to give you your Christmas present sir!” He squeaked, rushing his words out as Harry got to his feet, wincing and running hand through his morning hair.

“Forget it Dobby, don’t worry about it...” Harry grumbled, biting back his impatience as he yawned loudly, stretching out his lean, firm physique just as he heard Draco, Blaise, Crabbe and Goyle climbing out of their beds, looking as sleepy and as annoyed as he felt.

He smothered a grin as he saw Crabbe and Goyle promptly collapse back onto their beds, falling asleep yet again but Draco seemed to

cheer up as he heard the loud laughter in the common room, causing him to wake up immediately.

“Happy Christmas, Harry!” He greeted, giving his best friend a grin which Harry promptly returned, feeling the sleep leave him as he turned to Blaise, who was already pulling a casual robe over himself, obviously heading downstairs excitedly.

“Happy Christmas, Zabini.” Harry greeted, giving the other boy a small grin as well which Blaise returned with a lopsided grin of his own, his face beaming.

“Happy Christmas to you too, Potter, Malfoy.” He greeted before he hastily bounded down the stairs, surprising both Draco and Harry by his energy as they heard his loud cheers downstairs with the other Slytherins.

“Well, Dobby, like I said, here. Sorry, I uh... Forgot to wrap them.” Harry finally said, turning to give the house-elf a grin as he pulled a new sweater from under his bed and handed it to the ecstatic elf just as Draco began pulling a robe on to cover the pair of velvet pajama bottoms he had worn the night before.

“Harry Potter is too kind to Dobby! Thank you sir!” Dobby exclaimed in his high-pitched squeak as Harry began pulling a robe on himself as well, not wanting to head downstairs in a pair of his black golden-snitch patterned boxers.

Draco smirked at him, raising an eyebrow in amusement. “Why do you wear those boxers, Potter?” He asked, laughing.

Harry finally managed a weak grin in response, secretly relieved that Draco had stopped giving him the silent treatment he had seemed to be doing this whole week. “Because... They’re cute.” He answered sarcastically as Dobby happily gave him a wrapped gift, his eyes sparkling in anticipation.

“Thanks Dobby.” Harry said, managing a smile for the house-elf as well just as Dobby beamed with pride and began bounding down the stairs again but Draco held him back, giving the elf an amused smile.



“Here, Dobby, I promised you a sweater didn’t I? Have this one.” Draco said, handing another new sweater over to him, which Dobby accepted happily again, giving his former master a teary smile.

“Sir is very kind and noble! Thank you, master Draco, sir! Dobby does not deserve it but—”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s okay, Dobby. Don’t mention it.” Draco interrupted, not at all pleased at being called ‘*kind*’ and ‘*noble*’ but he held it back in the spirit of Christmas, watching as the elf happily headed down the stairs again before turning back to Harry, who had grinned at him.

The two froze in silence for a minute before Draco finally spoke up, giving Harry a hesitant look. “Uhm...Look...Harry, I’m uh...I’m sorry about...you know... what I said to you in the Great Hall before... I’m...I was way out of line.” He said slowly, not at all enjoying the idea of apologizing.

Harry shook his head and grinned at him, looking relieved. “Draco, if there’s anyone here that should be saying sorry, it’s me. I guess I was just being a cranky, nasty asshole that week, you didn’t deserve any of the shit I threw at you...So I’m...I’m sorry.” He said slowly.

To his surprise, Draco laughed, his silver eyes sparkling in amusement.

“I knew the silent treatment would reel you right in, Potter... But just to tell you, yeah...You *should* be the one saying sorry but you know what? Forget about it. Let’s just forget if ever happened and I’ll somehow manage a way to endure the company of that oh-so-wonderful date you got for me.” He said, nodding.

Harry broke out into a laugh as well, offering his hand to his best friend, which Draco promptly took for the both of them to perform their secret handshake. “From now on, the only fights we’ll be having together are those against those Gryffindor losers, alright?” Harry kidded, punching Draco lightly on the shoulder.

Draco smirked and nodded, looking incredibly amused. “You got it, Potter. You couldn’t handle me anyway.” He scoffed just as Harry

glared at him in annoyance, causing both of them to crack up in laughter once again.

“Hey, let’s go downstairs, eh Draco? Let’s see what presents we received this year.” Harry finally said, causing Draco to narrow his eyes in question at the sudden depressed tone in his best friend’s voice but he nodded and followed Harry down to the common room where most of the Slytherins had gathered in front of the fireplace, all of them opening their presents.

It was some sort of Slytherin tradition to open their presents together in the common room on Christmas morning... Harry didn’t know why but the upper years insisted that every Slytherin should place the gifts they received in the common room so that no one could open it until Christmas morning itself...

As soon as Harry and Draco had entered the common room, most of the Slytherins flashed them a smile, nodding and greeting the popular duo in acknowledgement while they just returned it with a grin, nodding back in response.

“Happy Christmas Harry!” AJ greeted as she jumped at him and gave him a tight hug, kissing him on both cheeks before she pulled away so he could see the excited smile on her face.

“Whoa... The Potter twins made up? Now how could I not know about this? Is World War 10 finally over?” Blaise kidded as he saw them but Harry and AJ both just raised their middle fingers up at him in response, causing Draco to smirk behind him.

“Happy Christmas Ma—Draco.” AJ said lightly, looking at Draco for a moment as he smiled back in response, leaning over and enveloping the girl in his arms in a tight embrace for a minute, causing AJ to blush and stiffen in surprise and Harry and Blaise to both shift uneasily as the two headed over to their pile of presents.

For a moment, AJ let herself relax into his comforting embrace but then Draco pulled back, winking at her before following Harry to their pile of presents, leaving the girl staring after him in shock and mild indignation.

Sighing, she walked over and joined the three boys in front of the Fireplace, plopping herself down in front of her presents and beginning to open them all one by one, taking the time to read and inspect each one carefully as Harry promptly did the same beside her.

After a couple of moments time, their laps were soon loaded with numerous presents, all of which seeming to be better than the next. Sirius had given Harry a new handy magical penknife which he had added in the note that he knew Harry could use to his advantage, causing Harry to smirk to himself in agreement.

He had given AJ a new beautiful compact mirror which seemed to talk and yell out annoying comments every now and then, something AJ found extremely amusing, especially when it had yelled out "*dumb blonde*" to Draco.

Of course, Hagrid had given them both a box full of their favorite sweets, which they had already started munching on, by the way, as they continued to open their gifts, one by one, tearing the wrapper frantically in concealed anticipation.

Prof. Snape had given Harry and Draco, his two favorite students in class, an interesting book with numerous hexes and curses for them to learn which Harry and Draco had both grinned at and kept right away, excited to go through them later.

Snape seemed to realize that AJ wasn't particularly fond of causing trouble so he gave her a book about the Potter family and the history behind their bloodline instead, which she had squealed at in excitement and vowed to read later, moving on to the next present.

For some strange reason, Pansy and Lila had once again given AJ a new set of magical make-up which she set aside in disgust, marveling at the fact that the two girls seemed to give her the same thing every year.

As usual, Harry and Draco had received their usual presents from a lot of different girl admirers in Hogwarts who were asking them out, the majority of them being home-made sweets, pastries, roses or sometimes, in Draco's case, green and silver striped boxers, which

had caused him to sputter in horror and humiliation as Harry burst into laughter.

However, Draco soon got his revenge at laughter when Harry had received a very amusing pair of bright green boxers with the words, "I'm a sexy, Slytherin bad-ass" written in bold black letters again and again over it, causing him to flush in embarrassment as the other Slytherins collapsed into hysterics.

What was worse, Parvati seemed to think highly of herself as she had given Harry an expensive picture frame with a very flattering picture of herself in it, a small note of "I love you, Harry!" on the corner of the picture.

Harry set it aside immediately in both disgust and guilt, feeling a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach as he thought of how he would ever survive the Yule Ball tonight with Parvati and having to see Hermione with another guy.

His eyes glazed over once again as he briefly thought of his beautiful Gryffindor but he was snapped out of his trance when Draco had exclaimed loudly beside him, causing him to jump and turn to see that Draco had finally opened his present and was looking at it in awe.

"Bloody hell, Harry! A Firebolt! You're the best friend a fellow could hope for, Potter!" Draco exclaimed, clapping him on the back as Harry grinned in return, shrugging at him.

"I knew you wanted one ever since third year but your father wouldn't buy you one because of your grades. I figured you deserved it especially after what I said to you before, Drac..." Harry whispered to him, looking over to make sure AJ couldn't hear them.

Draco looked at him in surprise, his eyes widening in disbelief. "What did you say, Harry?" He asked again, raising both his eyebrows now.

"Look... What I'm trying to say is... That's not my only present for you this Christmas... I'll give you the other one later in during the ball... I guarantee it's better than the Firebolt." Harry promised, offering him a hand.

Draco gladly took it and the two boys performed their special friendship handshake before Draco turned back to his gleaming Firebolt, grinning widely in delight. *What ever could be better than a Firebolt?* Draco thought but he dismissed the thought away, setting the broom aside and moving on to the next present.

“Oh my god...” AJ whispered in shock as she gingerly lifted the lid of the small box of the present Draco had given her, her eyes widening, touched and surprised at the same time as tears stung her eyes.

Draco turned to look at her reaction, biting his lip nervously as she inspected the silver heart-shaped locket he had given her. The locket hung from a beautiful sparkling silver chain, which AJ inspected closer, her eyes widening when she the name *AJ Potter* engraved on the thick chain in cursive letters.

Inspecting the locket itself, she saw another inscription behind it, an inscription which made her eyes tear up even more as she read it out loud.

*“To my beautiful Lily, I will always love you... Yours forever, James...”* She managed to choke out, causing Harry’s eyes to widen as well as AJ dared to slowly open the locket with trembling hands, Harry looking over her shoulder.

Inside, they saw a beautiful picture of both their parents when they were students here at Hogwarts, obviously outside the castle on the grounds as James had his arm wrapped around Lily’s slender waist and Lily was leaning back in his arms, her back pressed onto his chest.

They were both smiling and waving at them as James would occasionally rest his chin on Lily’s shoulder from where he held her from behind and give her a kiss on the cheek, causing Lily to laugh and swat him playfully.

Lily’s beautiful eyes were sparkling with love and warmth and James’ handsome face was beaming with a smile as they grinned back at them in the picture, definitely reminding the twins of their own selves as they finally got to see their parent’s teenage faces up close.

By now, AJ had let the tears of happiness cascade freely down her face as she closed the locket and smiled up at Draco, who was shifting around uncomfortably in anticipation.

Harry promptly moved out of the way as AJ launched herself at Draco, wrapping her arms around him in a hug and repeatedly kissing his cheek in happiness, laughing at her own antics.

“Draco, I love it! Thank you!! Thanks so much, you don’t know how much this means to me! Thank you!” She exclaimed again, not having the willpower to realize what she was doing as she leaned forward and kissed him right on the lips, causing Harry and Blaise’s eyes to widen.

Draco stiffened in surprise for a minute as his eyes widened considerably but AJ didn’t seem to notice, her arms going around his neck and her lips pressed against his unmoving ones. Then, realizing what she had done, her eyes widened as well and the two Slytherins stared awkwardly at each other, lips still unwilling to separate.

Blaise cleared his throat, embarrassed, causing AJ to finally blink and pull away in shock, her cheeks immediately flushing a dark red in embarrassment. “I uh... Sorry... I didn’t mean to, I uh.. Sorry... I was just excited... That’s all...” She mumbled in shock as Draco gave her a full-fledged smile, his eyes sparkling with life for the first time it had in weeks.

“You know you want me, Potter...You can’t even keep your hands off me.” He teased lightly, causing AJ to glare despite herself but it later broke off into a gentle, affectionate laugh, shaking her head at his antics.

“Yeah...Well, I don’t know why...” She muttered under her breath, causing Harry’s eyes to widen at her but Draco didn’t seem to notice, giving her a confused look. “What?” He asked, his eyebrows fusing together.

“*Nothing.* Anyway, thank you so much, Draco...I uh—”

“I’m glad you like it. It was your mother’s before... I charmed the locket to make it look brand new once again and I replaced the chain

since the old one was broken..." Draco told her, shooting a cautious glance at Harry but to his surprise, his best friend had just quietly turned back to his presents, not at all bothered at what had happened.

"Where did you find it?" Harry suddenly asked, looking at Draco questioningly but Draco bit his tongue, not wanting to reply.

To tell the truth, he had stumbled upon the locket in Prof. Snape's office before and he had promptly asked him if he could have it so he could give it to AJ... Prof. Snape had been reluctant at first, refusing to answer any question as to why he had it there but Draco hadn't pressed for details, just delighted to find it himself.

Snape had only given it to him when he had promised not to tell Harry or AJ where he had found it and Draco had agreed to the terms at once, content to find it for AJ.

"Oh you know... Just... Around... I just got lucky." He muttered in response, shrugging at him.

Harry didn't look convinced but AJ nodded, giving him a beautiful smile as she held it up to him, both of them suddenly oblivious to the fact that Harry and Blaise were still beside them, seeing nobody else around the room except the other.

"Could you be the one to put it on me?" She asked softly, causing Draco to smile back as he took the locket from her hands, his fingers lightly brushing her fingertips for a moment, a shock of electricity emitting from them both at the contact.

Draco waited until AJ turned around and lifted her hair up, exposing her slender neck and waited nervously as Draco put the locket around her, caressing the curve of her neck briefly as he did.

AJ's breathing hitched at the contact once more before she turned around again, giving him a smile as she went back to her presents, a happy sparkle in her eyes.

The four Slytherins remained silent after that, Draco continuing on with a contented grin on his face, not noticing the sad smile Harry had

given them when he had watched them, finding himself wishing that he could have been with Hermione right now during Christmas...

*How pathetic I turned out to be huh?* Harry asked himself, shaking his head as he grabbed the nearest present next to him, tearing open the wrapper and breaking out into a small grin when he saw what was inside the box.

*Draco has outdone himself this time...* He thought as he pulled the gleaming Wizard's camera out of the box, recognizing it to be the newest model out, giving Draco a grin of gratitude.

Draco looked up, smirking at the look on his face as Harry promptly raised the camera to his eyes and took a picture of him immediately, smirking when Draco froze and glared at him in annoyance.

Harry just laughed and set it down; reaching for the other smaller box inside the box the camera had come in, raising an eyebrow in question at Draco.

"Open it, scarhead. It's your other gift." Draco answered sarcastically, rolling his eyes as Harry grinned at him and lifted the lid off the box, his eyes widening as he saw the small silver serpent-shaped earring, the serpent's eyes glowing bright green.

Smirking at his dazed look, Draco pointed to his own earring in his left ear, finally allowing Harry to see an earring just like his own except the serpent's eyes were glowing—

*Silver....* Harry thought, grinning. *Ain't that just like Draco?* He thought, promptly putting the earring into his own left ear, clapping Draco on the back before he turned back to his pile of presents.

"Hey Blaise, who's that one from?" AJ asked, looking at the beautiful ring Blaise had just slipped onto his finger with a smile on his glowing face.

Blaise burned bright red, looking at her in panic for a moment before he coughed and looked away, blushing darker, if possible. "N-no one... Anyway, here, I'll open your present next, AJ." He stuttered,



grabbing it and tearing the wrapper hastily, wanting to change the subject.

AJ raised an eyebrow but shrugged and turned back to her own gifts as Blaise let out a loud exclamation, his eyes widening.

“Hey, wicked! Where did you find this, AJ? I’ve been looking for this book for months now!” He exclaimed he hastily scanned the cover in awe, AJ laughing at the shocked looks on her brother’s face as he caught sight of the book.

“*Special Quidditch maneuvers of the Nineteenth Century, The Revised Edition*?! AJ, I wanted one just like it, why didn’t you get *me* one?!” Harry demanded, scowling at her.

AJ grinned sheepishly, shrugging in response. “Well, they’re really rare, Harry... I only found *one* and besides, I already bought your present.” She told him, gesturing to the small neatly wrapped box.

Harry grabbed it immediately and tore off the wrapping, exposing a beautiful, shiny silver pocketwatch, which seemed to be working already as he heard the loud ticking.

Eyes twinkling, Harry carefully lifted it out of the box and opened the watch, finding himself staring at an extremely flattering picture of him and AJ in their Hogwarts robes as the clock’s background, both of them hugging each other the way their parents had in AJ’s locket and smiling like they had no care in the world.

Harry chuckled as his picture self scowled at AJ, who was currently ruffling his hair, smirking when Harry had growled and had wrestled her off, both of their picture selves laughing.

He noticed that the clock wasn’t a normal clock as it had numerous hands instead of just two, one of the hands already having another winking picture of Harry and another hand having a picture of a smiling AJ, both of which pointed at “At Hogwarts”.

“It’s one of those magical watches... The charm to get the other people you care about on the blank hands is inside the box... That way... Though we’re not always together and you’re not always there

to watch over me, you'll always know I'm safe. As well as your other friends as well." AJ told him softly so that only he could hear.

Harry gave her a loving smile, reading the inscription on the back. "*Property of Harry James Potter.*"

"I just wanted you to realize Harry... That whenever you look at that watch, you'll know that I'm always with you wherever you go... That no matter what happens, it will always be the two of us together when it comes down to it... We're *twins*... And we'll always be twins no matter what." She told him, smiling.

Harry felt his heart melt at his twin's words as he smiled back at her, tucking the watch into his robes and leaning over to give his twin a hug, tightening his arms around her for a long time.

"I guess I was pretty stupid to think that could ever change between us, huh?" Harry asked, a sheepish but affectionate smile on his face.

They only broke apart when Draco had exclaimed loudly once more, drawing their attention back to him as he pulled out a beautiful dragon-shaped pendant on a thick silver chain.

AJ immediately blushed and looked down, causing Harry and Blaise to look at her in question as Draco held the pendant up into the light, his silver eyes widening.

"I-It's a charm necklace that sort of works.. Well.. Somehow, like a sneakoscope... The dragon charm grows realistically at a person who is being untrustworthy... Y-you don't *have* to like it, I just—"

Draco held up a hand to interrupted AJ's stammering as he slowly slipped the pendant on, still staring in awe as the dragon seemed to glow for a minute as it hung from his neck before it began twitching around and squirming, looking up at Draco with something that looked suspiciously like a grin.

Seeing Harry smirking next to Draco however, the dragon immediately turned to him and began baring its teeth, growling loudly, causing Draco to laugh and Harry to growl back in anger.

"I love it AJ... Thank you..." Draco said, holding the squirming dragon in his hand fondly for a minute, looking at it with a smile on his face.

"Great... Now we have another annoying dragon to worry about..." Harry muttered under his breath as AJ gave Draco a shaky smile and turned away again, coughing loudly, slipping on the gold charm bracelet Blaise had given her.

"Thanks, Blaisee-poo, I love it." She teased, laughing as Blaise stuck his tongue out at her in response, rolling his eyes.

AJ's eyes dropped when she noticed that she had already unwrapped all her presents and she hadn't seen Harry's yet, looking around for it for a minute before she looked up and met Harry's amused smile as he watched her, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Looking for your present?" He asked, chuckling AJ mock-scowled at him and nodded in response, allowing a smile when Harry laughed and stood up, using a simple levitation charm to make his gifts float after him.

"It's upstairs, I wanted to give it to you myself in private. Come on." Harry said, grabbing her hand and pulling her to her feet, flicking his wand over her gifts again the same way he did his.

"You guys stay here okay? We'll be right back." Harry said to Draco and Blaise, who both nodded, watching them intently as Harry led his sister upstairs to his dorm, their presents following behind them.

Harry made them stop right at the door, turning back to shoot his sister reckless grin. "You wait outside for a minute; I'm just going to get it ready." He said, winking.

AJ narrowed her eyes impatiently, crossing her arms over her chest and tapping her foot in annoyance. "Get it ready?! Harry, what's this all about? What are you up to?" AJ asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Harry just grinned again before he closed the door, making AJ growl in impatience as she leaned against the wall and waited impatiently, tapping her foot continuously as she heard Harry rummaging around

inside, loud scuffles heard until he opened the door again, looking nervous but excited.

AJ tried to peer over his shoulder but she couldn't see anything, Harry holding the door only half-way through. "Happy Christmas, AJ..." He whispered softly, smiling gently at her before he promptly moved aside, opening the door fully, allowing AJ to see the gift he had been hiding behind him.

AJ's eyes had widened as she saw the beautiful emerald green ball gown laid out on one of the beds in the room, visibly shaking and speechless as she took uneasy footsteps toward it, Harry watching nervously behind her.

Leaning over to inspect it, she gently caressed the silky material of the beautiful dress, noticing with a teary smile that it was easily the same color as her eyes and it was absolutely gorgeous...

"Why don't you try it on?" Harry asked, smiling as he watched her from where he was by the doorway, giving her an encouraging nod.

AJ looked back at him and gave him a smile before she complied and began slipping into the gown carefully, not at all wanting to wrinkle or damage the gown in anyway as Harry helped her zip it up from behind.

Glancing at her reflection in the mirror, she couldn't help admire the way the gown brought out the emerald in her glistening eyes, causing her to grin as Harry peered from over her shoulder at her reflection, raising an eyebrow.

"You're very beautiful, you know...You look like mom..." He said, an unreadable look in his eyes.

The gown was simple yet elegantly beautiful, made of pure silk which seemed to feel comfortable on her smooth skin as its long flowing skirt easily spreads out from the extremely fitted bodice of the strapless top which clung onto AJ's slender curves gracefully, emphasizing her bare shoulders.

“Harry... It’s beautiful... Thank you...” She said, smiling at herself before meeting her twin’s eyes through the mirror, turning around to face him once again but Harry turned her face back to the mirror, taking something out of his pocket.

“There’s still something missing...” He said, taking out a sparkling emerald necklace which he gingerly draped over her neck from behind, watching closely as the pendant easily fit in with the gown, forming a graceful “V” just below AJ’s neck.

“Harry, where on earth did you find that necklace? Don’t you think this is too much? I mean—”

AJ didn’t finish as Harry held up a hand to stop her, giving her a lopsided grin as he walked over to his bed and handed her a pair of white silk gloves which reached up to her elbows and a box of the matching hair accessories.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I saw them all in a Wizard magazine and I knew right away they were for you. Besides, if my sister is going to accompany a champion to the Yule Ball, even if I do hate the guy’s guts, you have to be the most beautiful girl there.” Harry told her sadly.

AJ’s eyes sparkled as she glanced back at her reflection, smiling at her appearance for a minute. “Well... *One* of the most beautiful... I’m betting the other will be your mystery girl right?” She asked teasingly, meeting his eyes in the mirror.

Harry tore his eyes away as they clouded over in pain, biting his lip but silently, he had to agree with what his twin had said. He knew Hermione was going to be the most beautiful girl at the ball to him...

Only it hurt to think that she wasn’t going to be holding onto *his* arm for the night... It hurt to think *he* wasn’t the one that would have the pleasure of accompanying her and he knew it was *his* fault...

“Harry?”

Harry blinked, snapping out of his thoughts as he looked back to see AJ staring at him in concern, turning away from the mirror, seeming to sense his sudden change of mood.

“Don’t worry... Whoever she is... I’m sure it’ll work out alright...” She told him, giving him a smile which Harry briefly returned, sighing before he turned to look at her reflection again, raising an eyebrow.

“I hope you didn’t have a gown ready... I wanted to give this to you on the day of the Yule Ball itself...” Harry said, watching as AJ inspected the gown again, gently caressing the skirt as she whirled around.

“Yeah... Actually, I did but it’s nowhere near as gorgeous as this one... Thanks Harry... I’m really sorry about accepting to go with Cedric but see, he’s my friend too and—”

Harry held up a hand to interrupt her, nodding and waving the subject away, not wanting to remember the fight they had because of it.

“Forget it, AJ... It’s okay... Just as long as you don’t expect me to be nice to him just because you’re his partner...” Harry added, sneering in disdain as AJ couldn’t help laughing, rolling her eyes.

“Of course not you git... He’s *my* friend. I don’t expect him to be *your* friend too... I’m just happy you’re not pissed at me anymore...” She said, walking over to him and giving him a brief hug.

“Thanks so much... Happy Christmas...”

“AJ?” Draco asked out loud as he entered the empty girls’ dormitory that afternoon, looking around to find the raven-haired girl but the room was empty, causing him to sigh in disappointment.

As soon as he had finished unwrapping all his presents, he had gone upstairs to look for her, wanting to thank her in private for the gift she had given him but so far, he couldn’t see AJ anywhere...

Draco looked down momentarily as the dragon on his necklace gave a short hiss, squirming once again and looking up at him with its bright eyes as Draco grinned down at it in amusement, chuckling lightly.

For some strange, stupid reason, he had decided to name the dragon “*Fierros*”, which Blaise had found strangely amusing but Draco had ignored his sniggers, playing with his new treasured dragon pendant in front of the fireplace the whole afternoon.

Draco let out a weary sigh as *Fierros* let out another hiss, causing Draco to roll his eyes and plop himself down on AJ’s four-poster bed, deciding it would be best to just wait for the girl to return.

*After all... She’s got to come back to dress up for the ball right?* He thought, smirking to himself.

Shutting his eyes, he leaned down onto the bed and folded his hands behind his head, propping his feet up on the end of the bed as he opened his eyes again and stared up at the ceiling in silence.

After a long moment of silent waiting, Draco yawned and rolled over, burying his head into her pillow and recognizing the sweet scent he knew only as AJ’s. He shut his eyes again, inhaling the addictive scent.

He smirked to himself and snuggled deeper into the covers, resting himself into the pillow but just as he was going to let himself drift into a short nap, his hand caught hold of something underneath the pillow, startling him in surprise.

Sitting up again, he pulled it out, his eyes widening in surprise when he saw green leather-bound notebook with gold pages, the initials “A.J.P.” marked on its cover.

*It’s AJ’s diary...* He thought in shock as he gently ran his fingertips over the soft material of the cover, itching to open the notebook and read what was written inside but something inside him held him back, telling him it wasn’t right to read her personal thoughts just like that.

*Ah heck... You sound like a bloody Gryffindor, Malfoy! Just open it! You know you want to!* A voice sneered inside his head but Draco shook it away hastily, growling at himself.

The gold pages gleamed in the light, almost calling out for him to read what was written in them but Draco just groaned and turned away

from the sight, clenching his hands in a vain attempt to keep them from opening the diary.

*I wonder what she writes here... I wonder if she writes about how she feels about 'me'...* He vaguely wondered, raising an eyebrow curiously as he tightened his grip on the thick diary, curiosity bursting through his veins.

The pages seemed to gleam again in response as Draco barely prevent himself from throwing open the cover and reading page by page so instead, he stood up and shakily placed the notebook back on her bedside table with trembling hands, reluctantly setting it down.

He was just about to turn away again when he accidentally dropped the diary too soon, causing it to fall carelessly to the floor as Draco cursed under his breath for his own clumsiness.

Rolling his eyes at himself, he bent down to pick it up but as he did, something caught his attention as he noticed the diary had opened up to a particular page, exposing AJ's neat, graceful handwriting.

Draco bent down slowly and gingerly picked it off the floor, his eyes immediately skimming over the pages, not being able to resist reading what was written in them.

*Dear Diary...*

*It's 5 am and I still can't sleep...I don't know what is happening to me anymore... I keep remembering that time when Draco and I kissed in the library... I actually let him... I can't get it out of my head! I don't even understand myself right now, it seems my mind has been nothing more than just a mess... I can't understand what I'm feeling right now.*

Draco's heart clenched as he read the next few lines, immediately overwhelmed by that dreaded familiar feeling of stinging at the corner of his eyes as he read the words AJ had written down ever so carefully.

*I don't even know why I'm bothering to think about him... I mean, WHY? Why should I go for Draco, right? I know what you're*



*thinking... For three years now, I've believed myself to want Ron Weasley right? That's three years, Diary, THREE years... Isn't that the stable feeling rather than this sudden attraction I feel for Draco? If I could choose for myself, I'd go for Ron... He's the type I've been hoping for. Not the jerk Draco is... He's the one I should choose... I love 'him' don't I? I've loved 'him' for years now... I know that if I were to make the 'right' the decision... That if I were to do the 'right' thing, I should go for Ron...But—*

Draco couldn't bear to read it anymore as he shakily let the diary drop onto the floor, feeling the harsh, bitter tears now cascading freely down his cheeks as everything else seemed to blur around him, suddenly looking cold and unfamiliar.

*Sh-she... She doesn't love me... She loves.... W-Weasley... She's b-been wanting him for years... All this time I've loved her, she loved someone else all along...* Draco realized, breathing very heavily as he took a few steps backwards, causing him to lose his balance and stumble onto the cold floor.

He barely even registered the pain as he clenched his hands into tight, angry fists, feeling himself tremble in rejection and heartbreak, bolting right up, his teary eyes looking dazed and unfocused as he struggled to maintain his control.

Breathing irregular and unsteady, he twisted his face into a cold, bitter sneer as he snatched the diary roughly from the floor and slammed it shut, shoving it back under the pillow.

*Never in my entire life... Have I ever felt so worthless and rejected...* He thought, wincing in pain as his heart clenched again.

He had never once experienced heartbreak and he had never thought that it would come from AJ... He wasn't taught by his father or his mother how to face something like this... Hell, he himself didn't know how to handle this... He had never been hurt this badly before...

Knowing he couldn't hold it in much longer, Draco spun on his heel and bolted out the door, slamming it as hard as he could and

storming off back towards his own dorms, shoving Harry out of the way, who was looking for him.

“Hey, Draco! Where are you going? I was going to talk to you about my sister—” Harry stopped when he saw the look on Draco’s face, causing him to narrow his eyes in concern.

“Save it, Potter! I don’t want to talk about that right now!! Now *fuck off!*” Draco yelled furiously at him before he shoved Harry away roughly again, heading up to their dorms and violently slamming the door again, leaning against it from inside the empty room in tense silence.

*“What more do you want from me, Potter?! Huh? You’ve already succeeded in breaking my goddamn pride, now you have to break my heart too?!”* He screamed out angrily before he leaned his head back against the door, screwing his eyes shut tightly, ignoring Fierros’ hisses as his tears fell listlessly down to the cold ground.

Should Draco have stayed longer in the girls’ dorms and read AJ’s diary longer, he would have noticed the last few lines of her diary, which would have prevented all of this altogether...

*But... Maybe I don’t want to make the right choice... Maybe I don’t actually want to be right at all... Maybe I never did... Because as much as I try to keep denying it all my life... I ‘do’ love Draco... More than anything else in the world...And I realize that now. I love him enough that I don’t care if it’s wrong or not... I just do... And somehow, I know, that’s what real love has ever been all about...Whether it’s right or not...*

**A/N:** I swear, I hate to hurt my little Draco like that but hey... sigh What must be done must be done... sobs Well, I hoped you enjoyed that chapter... Not much romance here but I had to resolve everything between Harry and AJ first and I had to get Christmas finished before I did anything else. Don’t worry, more to come! Hope you enjoy it and please don’t forget, **REVIEW!! REVIEW!! REVIEW!!**

## Chapter 22- The Yule Ball

*I don't believe this... The night hasn't even started and already I want it to end...* Hermione thought bitterly as she stepped into one of the shower stalls, gingerly shutting out Parvati's excited squeals outside as Lavender, who was going with Ron to the ball, helped her into her gown.

She wasn't blind. She saw the haughty, triumphant smirks Parvati kept sending her whenever they would catch each other's gazes... She saw how Parvati showed Harry off to Hermione every chance she got.

All throughout this entire week, it seemed the school had caught up with Harry and Parvati getting back together and Hermione could do nothing but watch bitterly as Parvati once again clung onto his arm wherever he went, smiling smugly at Hermione as she did, showing Harry off like some prized trophy she had won.

What had pissed Hermione off even more was the fact that Harry didn't seem to do anything about Parvati's advances, giving in to them with a dark, blank face and letting her drag him off to the different places she wanted to go to.

After the incident that had happened the last time she had talked to Parvati, Hermione hadn't spoken a word to anyone else since except for Ron and Seamus, telling them not to worry about her and that she had run off the way she did only because of a stomachache.

The two of course, being Ron and Seamus, hadn't believed her but Hermione had said nothing more to affirm it, ignoring their attempts to get her to talk as she shut them all out and dedicating all her energy to studying to forget about Harry Potter once and for all.

As far as she was concerned, she never wanted to have anything to do with him ever again... he had hurt her enough already. She didn't want to put up with any of it anymore... It was because of the handsome Slytherin that she had gotten to a point that she had hated herself for not being good enough for him...

Now she knew that she had done nothing wrong at all... It had been him... All him... She should have never allowed herself to fall in love with her Slytherin enemy anyway... In fact, she should have never gotten involve with him in any way at all...

She had regretted even following him that one day in the Astronomy tower that had been the start of their friendship... She should *NEVER* have trusted him... Never have become friends with him and should *NEVER...NEVER* have allowed herself to love him...

Up until now, she had believed herself to be a smart witch but now she realized that because of that single mistake, she had proved herself to be just as stupid as those other girls Harry had dated had been...She had fallen for his charms and his smiles the same way they all did... The only difference was that she had been sane enough to keep herself from losing something precious to him before it was too late...

*He hurt me one too many times already... I've had enough... I do not have to take this from him... There are other guys who deserve me better...* Hermione thought angrily, feeling her eyes sting again.

*No... No more... Please, no more... I will not cry for him anymore... I already wasted too much of my tears for someone who doesn't even deserve them...* She screamed inwardly at her own mind, shaking her head to clear the tears away.

She couldn't believe it... All this time, she had thought that he could change... That despite everything about him, he could find it in his heart to actually care about her but once again, she cursed her own bad judge of character.

*Ron was right all along... Once a Slytherin always a Slytherin and Slytherins 'never' deserve to be trusted...* Hermione agreed darkly, shutting her eyes as she felt the water from the shower cascade down her delicate face.

*Well he and Parvati deserve each other... They're both the same—heartless and shallow... If she wants him, she can have him. I'm not going to fight for someone unworthy of me.* Hermione decided,

opening her eyes again and rubbing shampoo onto her mane of silky brown hair.

Every single time she had heard Harry's name this past week, it had been like individuals arrows shooting right into her chest and she was mad at herself for caring so much that she had built herself an inner wall...

Just like Harry, she masked her eyes with a cold, hateful glare... As soon as she had the chance, she had taken the sweater and the handkerchief Harry had given her and had thrown it under her bed, never wanting to look at them ever again.

It was at that very moment that she had sworn him off for good... Vowing to herself never to let the Slytherin hurt her again and building another wall around herself but this time, around her heart to make sure Harry could never reach out and play with it once more... It seemed that was what he liked to play with most of all when it came to her... Well... Maybe she was wrong after all... If in fact, those other girls have lost their virginity to Harry James Potter, she had lost something much more precious than that...

She had lost her only heart to him... And she hated herself for it. Of all the guys here at Hogwarts, why would she ever pick the only one who loved to make her cry... Who loved to see her suffer and the one who loved to step on her and treat her like dirt...

*Why him? Why Potter?* Hermione had asked herself this again and again...Each time, she just got angrier and angrier...At him...At Parvati but most of all, herself.

*Had I really been that dense? I have never, in my entire life, felt more worthless, more pathetic and more dirty until I've gotten involved with him! Never!! He's made me feel so cheap... So used and so stupid!* Hermione raged inwardly at herself, clenching her hands tightly.

It had hurt so much to think that the first boy she had loved was also the first boy that had dared to hurt her so much... Though Hermione regretted it, she knew that it would leave her emotionally-scarred for life...

*I can't believe I ever actually considered the idea of him loving me... He'll never change...* She concluded, sighing heavily as she grabbed the soap and started to soap herself lavishly.

*Why did I ever allow himself to open up to him? Why did I ever fall for him?* She asked briefly again, though she knew the answer already.

For once, it seemed as though Harry was actually sincere when he was with her... The way he laughed and his beautiful emerald eyes sparkled with warmth and affection when he looked at her...

It was almost as if he was a different, better person who was buried deep underneath the selfish, conceited Slytherin she had come to know all these years... Almost as if the Harry she had kissed, the Harry she had been with was a different person from the Harry she saw in the corridors everyday...

Like she was actually getting to know the real person he was... The person he was, behind the mask... And that Harry was the one Hermione had fallen in love with... Not the sadistic jerk she was seeing now... Now, Harry was being the same guy he was to her three years ago. It was almost hard for her to believe that after all this time, it had been an act all along to just toy with her emotions... It had seemed so real... She swore that when he had looked at her, she saw in his eyes the same sparkle that he only normally had for his twin...

*I'll get over him... I'll move on... Harry James Potter was nothing more than a waste of my time and of my affections.* Hermione thought coldly, shutting her eyes once again as she let the water wash her off one more time, taking in a deep breath of air.

She couldn't even remember how much of herself and her tears she had spilled out the day Harry had dared to ask Parvati in front of her... She had cried so much that she thought she wouldn't have any tears left but apparently, she did as those tears continued to come every night from then on until Hermione finally put an end to it by replacing her misery with anger.

Then she had promised that she had finished crying for him and that she had already given enough tears... She would *never* let Parvati

see how much she had managed to hurt her... So she ignored every single one of Parvati's remarks at her, showing her and everyone else that she was stronger than that.

She would not give in to the other girl's advances... She would never fight back because then, she would be proving that she was just as low... Just as disgusting and just as weak as Parvati herself was... No... She would take this like the proud Gryffindor she was... She would take this without fear and without hiding from her problem.

She would face everything they threw at her with her bravery and her nobility but most of all, she would face them all with her chin up. She knew it was the best revenge she could ever give Parvati without hurting anyone like the other girl had.

Parvati had seemed pissed at seeing this and had taunted her relentlessly throughout the entire week but Hermione ignored every one of her taunts, proving that she couldn't care less and that she was not going to cower away like some weak, cowardly Slytherin.

Despite every single insult thrown at them, Hermione was *damn* proud to be a Gryffindor and now, thanks to Harry's disgusting display of his Slytherin qualities, she had loved her house more than ever.

*Why am I even bothering myself by thinking about him?* Hermione snapped at her own thoughts as she angrily turned off the shower, reaching out from inside her stall for her towel and wrapping it slowly around her slender form before she stepped out, using another towel to dry her hair.

Outside, she could still hear Parvati's excited squeals and Lavender's exclamations of agreement as both girls seemed to be excited about the ball since the two had been hogging the mirror for about an hour now.

Seamus, to Hermione's surprise, was going with Mandy after all since he had managed to gather the courage the week before, asking her out in front of all her friends.

Ron had asked Lavender the same day, which Lavender had immediately accepted, looking pleased with herself as Ron, whom

Hermione had to admit, was actually quite a looker himself. He had that 'innocent boy' look around him that drove a number of girls crazy.

"I wonder how they're going to react once they find out who *my* date is..." Hermione muttered darkly under her breath as she stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around her hair turban style.

Almost immediately, Parvati and Lavender stopped giggling, turning around to face her as Parvati let out a mocking sneer of derision at her, raising an eyebrow at the girl in challenge.

"Hmm... Hermione, *dear*... Finally decided to make yourself look *half-decent* for the Yule Ball? It's about time... I was beginning to think you were going to go looking like an old hag... Which I wouldn't put past you by the way... After all, someone like you would need *hours* to get ready." Parvati said sarcastically, giggling.

Hermione didn't answer her, walking past her confidently and heading over to her bed, preparing the new ball gown her parents had sent her the day before.

"Parvati, would you quit being such a bitch? We've all had enough of you crap, okay?" Lavender snapped at her, looking at her best friend in disgust for a minute before she inspected her reflection one last time.

Parvati opened her mouth to argue but Hermione finally looked at the both of them, giving them both a tight, forced smile. "Would you both mind getting out now? From what I can see, you're both done so I'd like to get ready *alone*." She said abruptly, looking slightly impatient.

"Oh yeah, of *course* you would... You definitely need a *lot* of work dearie... After all, you're going to accompany a champion too, remember? You need to look your best... Like *me*... Since, The best Hogwarts champion *and* the hottest boy in the whole school did ask *me* to accompany him..." Parvati pointed out smugly again, smiling at the dark angry look in Hermione's eyes.

"Well, congratulations. You two make a perfect couple now would you mind?" Hermione said icily, raising an eyebrow at her in response.



Lavender seemed to get the message and made a move to get out but Parvati stood her ground, only sneering at Hermione as she crossed her arms over her chest, her blood red ball gown sparkling in the light.

Parvati sighed dramatically, looking very pleased with herself as she batted her eyelashes at her reflection for effect. "Harry's such a catch isn't he? But of course, *you* wouldn't know what he's like... He only goes for girls like *me*..." She drawled, smirking.

Hermione clenched her hands into fists, refusing to get mad or to blow up at the girl in front of her. "I'm not interested in such a jerk like him... So believe me, Patil, you two *deserve* each other. You can have him, *forever*. Now get out." She replied evenly, her voice sounding cold and devoid of emotion.

"Yup, you're right Hermione... He's mine... All mine..." She murmured in pleasure before she whipped around, her long flowing skirt whirling behind her as she stalked out of the room, slamming the door rudely behind her.

Hermione sighed, lifting her wand and whispering a complicated locking charm on the door before she turned to her trunk, finally pulling out the gown her parents had bought for her from the very bottom since she had wanted to make sure no one else saw it before the Ball itself.

Hermione took the towel wrapped around her hair and began drying herself with it as she inspected her reflection in the mirror, lavishly brushing her long, beautiful brown locks out as she did.

Within a whole hour, Hermione stood right in front of the full-length mirror in the room, inspecting her appearance carefully as she hesitantly smiled at herself, pleased and surprised at the same time at how different she looked.

*I look... I look beautiful... No, 'I'm' beautiful...* She finally realized as she turned around again and again, inspecting her reflection carefully as she did, a bright glowing smile on her face and her eyes sparkling vividly once again.

In fact, this had been the first time in weeks that Hermione had allowed herself to smile like that and the first time in weeks that she had actually felt excited about something...

It seemed as though the excitement of this Yule Ball had revived her miserable spirits as the dark circles under her eyes seemed to have disappeared and her once cold, lifeless eyes were now glittering beautifully once again...

It was... it was the first time she had ever looked happy ever since that day she had last talked to Harry in the classroom in which he had left her crying and broken... *Maybe this Yule Ball isn't going to be so bad after all...* She thought, smiling at herself as she surveyed her appearance once more, admiring the beautiful gown she wore.

The gown was extremely beautiful and elegant...She was wearing a very stylish, gown made of purely white satin that had a much fitted bodice top with very thin white straps over her shoulders, clinging very snugly onto Hermione's graceful curves.

The gown's skirt flowed out gracefully from the fitted top, long enough to skim lightly on the floor as she walked so that Hermione had to lift it very slightly to prevent from stepping on the delicate fabric.

It easily emphasized her beautiful, slender shoulders and her smooth neck since her long brown hair had been piled up neatly on top of her head as she had left several strands down to frame her glowing face.

"Ooh... Who's the lucky guy, gorgeous?" Her reflection asked, smirking at her, causing Hermione's eyes to drop for a moment, looking away before she glanced back up, giving the reflection a wry grin.

"Viktor Krum." She said, smirking back as her reflection promptly just raised an eyebrow in response, obviously not at all impressed.

Feeling her confidence returning, she walked back slowly to her bed, careful not to step on her long skirt as she reached down and began slipping on the long, white matching gloves of the dress made of the same material as her gown.

The gloves reached up to her elbows, giving her a classy, sophisticated look whilst she began slipping on the simple but sparkling dangling earrings, finishing up the whole attire when she slipped her stocking-clad feet into a pair of comfortable white dress shoes.

Hermione sprayed a whiff of her favorite perfume on herself before she began surveying her reflection for one last time, feeling like she was five years older when she caught sight of her appearance once more.

She looked classy but it was definitely nothing too outrageous... Simple yet beautiful... *Just the way Harry likes me...* She couldn't help thinking but she shook the thought away in annoyance, angry at herself for thinking about him again.

*Well... Harry Potter, you are now officially the stupidest jerk on the planet for dropping me like that... I'm going to have a great time at the Yule Ball with Viktor... I want to forget you ever existed...* Hermione thought, a brief sparkle of sadness in her eyes before she finally headed out, ready to begin the night.

"Knock, knock to any ugly trolls in there." A familiar, amused-filled voice drawled outside the girls' dormitories, causing AJ to whirl around from where she was examining herself in the mirror in surprise.

Recognizing her twin brother's familiar voice, she rolled her eyes, laughing at the implied tease before turning back to examine her reflection, silently thankful that Pansy, Lila and Millicent had already finished and were downstairs.

"You can come in, jerk-face! It's open!" She called back to him as she held up the necklace Harry had given her, momentarily debating with herself whether to wear it or to wear the locket Draco had given her.

Harry walked in immediately, looking incredibly handsome and about five years more mature in his new, expensive black tux with his hair gelled neatly, causing AJ to smile in amusement when she noticed that he had not fixed his tie on properly.

“AJ... You look beautiful.” Harry told her truthfully, his eyes sparkling in pride as he took in his twin sister’s appearance, feeling a heavy feeling squeeze inside him but once again, he held it back, smiling at her.

He had been right to buy her an emerald-green gown because it completely brought out the beautiful green in her eyes as they seemed to sparkle with life more than ever, a big smile on her glowing face.

AJ had fixed her hair stylishly on top of head, using a considerable amount of hair gel and complex spells to keep it neat and in place as she let a single lock of raven hair fall down in front of her face into a twisted curl.

The gown showed off just the right amount of skin to be attractive but it definitely didn’t make Harry too nervous since it wasn’t as outrageous as the gowns Pansy and Lila were wearing, both of which had caused him to grimace in disbelief.

Though the top didn’t have straps, it was tight enough to cling on firmly onto her curves without looking too scandalous, which Harry had been thankful for that he had been the one to choose her gown.

AJ smiled warmly at him as she began slipping on her gloves before she turned back to him, surveying his attire in approval.

“Thanks jerk-face... Hmm... You look pretty sharp yourself, Harry... Except...” AJ laughed as she stepped towards him and adjusted the tie on his tuxedo, fixing it neatly under his neck as Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance.

“You don’t have to look too *excited* about the Ball, Harry.” AJ pointed out sarcastically as Harry sighed, collapsing back down on one of the beds the same time AJ walked back to the mirror, lifting her skirt up slightly to prevent stepping on it.

“Why bother? I don’t really give a *fuck* about being champion and I don’t really give a *fuck* about my partner anyway... This ball is just a waste of my *fucking* time.” He cursed darkly, glaring at his shiny black

shoes as AJ rolled her eyes and sat down beside him, giving him a pointed look.

“Hey... Harry, you know, nothing will ever happen if you’re just going to sit on your ass the whole day when the entire female population of Hogwarts is already out in the hall just waiting to dance with you. Forget Patil... You can ditch her during the ball anyway.” AJ told him, giving him a smirk.

Harry allowed a laugh, rolling his eyes AJ stood up again, holding the necklace he had given her in one hand and the locket Draco had given her in the other. “Which one do you think I should wear, Harry?” She asked, giving him a smile.

Harry shrugged weakly, leaping back up to his feet and grabbing both from her outstretched hands. “How about both?” He suggested, indicating for her to whirl around as he began putting them both on for her, fastening the chains around her neck.

However, his eyes widened in shock and suspicion when he caught sight of the small serpent-shaped birthmark standing out amidst the pale skin behind her shoulder, looking strangely similar to the one Harry had on his own.

Fortunately, AJ didn’t notice his shocked stare as she began inspecting herself carefully again, smiling at her reflection just as Harry ran his fingers down the black mark as though he was making sure if the mark was really there.

*Maybe it is a birthmark... Probably nothing to worry about... She has it, I have it... It’s a birthmark...* Harry told himself, stroking the mark with a finger, annoyed that his sister’s pale flawless skin was marked with such a vile mark as that.

But his jaw soon dropped open when the black mark seemed to glow bright green for a minute when he had touched it with his bare fingers, causing him to step back in surprise as the glow soon faded away slowly, turning back to its original black color.

Then, without knowing why he had suddenly felt a strange sense of fear overwhelm him, Harry stepped forward again and pulled the back

of his sister's gown up to make sure that the fabric was covering the black mark, looking up to see his sister's incredulous gaze at him from the mirror's reflection.

"Harry? What on earth are you doing?" She asked, sounding amused as she raised an eyebrow at him.

Harry shook his head hastily, trying to cover up his worried look with a reassuring smile, silently vowing to himself to ask her about that mark some other time but now, he didn't want to worry her about it.

"N-nothing. So, are you ready to go down now?" He asked her, abruptly changing the subject.

AJ shrugged before Harry whirled her around to face him, smiling as he offered his arm to her, bowing down in a playful gesture of respect.

"Would you by any chance grant me the honor of escorting you down to the common room?" He asked, smiling wider when AJ slipped her gloved-clad arm into his, laughing as he led them out of the dorm.

Harry silently led her down the stairs to the Common room where he knew most of the Slytherins were waiting, opening the door for his sister as they walked into the already crowded common room.

At the sight of the popular twins, the other Slytherins burst out into cheers and catcalls, the boys grinning and giving the appreciative whistles while the girls all blushed and stared openly at Harry in admiration.

"Looking good Potter!" A seventh-year girl had called out, winking at Harry suggestively but Harry barely acknowledged her back, ignoring the looks all the girls were now giving him as they saw him.

Harry just plastered on a practiced smirk in response but AJ had blushed dark red in embarrassment, ignoring all the admiring looks the other boys gave her as they saw her.

Harry looked around for his best friend for a moment, finally seeing Draco sitting with some Slytherin seventh-years, already elegantly

clad in his expensive black tux, his silver-blond hair gelled back neatly from his face and his serpent earring gleaming in his left ear.

Draco however, hadn't noticed them come in yet as he seemed to be in a deep state of trance, glaring down darkly at his black shoes as Harry suspiciously detected a hint of sadness in his eyes as he did.

Unlike him earlier, Draco's tux was properly and neatly worn, showing once again the air of sophistication and elegance found within a Malfoy as he carried the tux with an air of confidence and aristocracy.

Draco suddenly looked up, finally noticing them but his eyes had not lingered long on Harry but instead, he had stared openly slack-jawed at AJ, who seemed to be staring at him in the exact same way, blushing darker when she noticed his eyes cloud over in longing and desire.

He hopped up immediately, shakily getting to his feet and walking over to them, his eyes never leaving AJ as he let them trail up and down her form, taking in every inch of how beautiful she looked.

Harry unwound his arm from his twin and watched silently as Draco nervously walked up to her, still looking completely dazed as though he didn't know or couldn't figure out what to say.

"You look very handsome, Draco." AJ said honestly, managing a smile as she saw him, her eyes sparkling with admiration and longing as she took in his appearance, feeling a sharp pang of regret at having declined to go with him to the ball.

Draco, who had paled suddenly, bowed down slowly, taking her gloved hand and bending forward to give it a soft kiss, his eyes locking intently with hers for a long time as he did.

"You look absolutely beautiful, AJ..." He said softly, his voice barely above a whisper as he forced himself to wrench his gaze away sadly when he felt his chest clench in pain.

Frowning, he angrily ignored the stinging in his already swollen eyes again as he told himself that she wasn't his to stare at...

Harry watched them both for a minute, looking at Draco in question but Draco had seemed to mask his eyes all of a sudden, turning away from them sharply, fighting the strong urge to gather the beautiful girl in his arms and kiss her passionately.

“Well, we better get going... I have to get there early, I’m a champion...” Harry said, rudely shoving away the girl that he suddenly found clinging tightly to his arm before leading AJ and Draco out of the common room.

“Where’s Blaise?” AJ asked suddenly, looking around for a glimpse of her best friend as Harry escorted her out to the Great Hall, the three of them in front of the large group of Slytherins behind them, managing to pass by some of the other students who were heading to the Great Hall as well.

“He wanted to meet his date early so he already left.” Harry told her, now extremely irritated as he noticed the admiring looks he and Draco were both receiving from the girls in the halls, hearing excited whispers and giggles all around them.

AJ noticed this as well, smirking to herself in amusement. “Just my luck to be walking to a corridor filled with giggly girls with the Slytherin duo...” She teased sarcastically, watching as the other houses seemed to clear away at the sight of the large group of Slytherins.

Both Harry and Draco barely reacted at all, Harry now having a dark, cold smirk pasted on his face and Draco glaring at the floor as they walked, causing her to fuse her eyebrows together in question.

She didn’t have much time to ponder on it when they reached the entrance to the Great Hall where Cedric was already waiting in front of the doors, smiling and looking very handsome in his own carefully chosen and obviously tailored tuxedo.

“You look beautiful, Amanda...” He said, giving her another smile as he offered his arm to her when they had reached him, causing Harry to stiffen and glare darkly at him in warning when he had let his twin go.



Draco watched with his eyes wide as saucers, looking angry, shocked and confused all at the same time when AJ had slipped her arm now through Cedric's, leaning over to give Harry a peck on the cheek before she let his arm go.

"Be careful Diggory... I'll be watching..." Harry threatened darkly in a poisonous hiss, his eyes glinting maliciously but Cedric just nodded, meeting his challenging glare.

The other Slytherins behind them glared darkly in warning at AJ for going with a Hufflepuff, which she ignored, rolling her eyes.

Then, though looking slightly reluctant to do so, AJ leaned over and kissed Draco on the cheek, letting her lips linger there for a moment as if she hadn't wanted to pull back and closing her eyes for a moment as she did. Finally, she forced herself to pull away, meeting his eyes for a long time until she finally turned away, walking off with Cedric.

Harry sighed, watching as his rival and his twin entered the Hall together but just as he was about to follow in after, a loud shriek of happiness indicated to both him and Draco that their dates had arrived.

Harry met Draco's eyes for a minute, seeing the same aggravated wince reflected there before they both turned to see Parvati and Padma Patil making their way towards them excitedly, their beautiful faces lightened with wide smiles.

Harry had to wince again as he caught sight of Parvati's gown, a rich *blood* red color which was sparkling so outrageously with so much glitter that Harry had to squint to see her face properly. He finally noticed that Parvati styled her hair into cork-screw curls swirling around her, looking too extravagant for him to consider elegantly beautiful but definitely beautiful nonetheless.

Eyeing Padma, who had jumped right into Draco and had immediately wrapped an arm around his, Harry saw that she looked

exactly the same but the only difference was that her gown was black instead of red and her hair was styled into waves, not curls.

Harry just cursed under his breath, shaking his head at himself... It amazed him how much these kind of girls all seemed to disgust him now ever since he had gotten close to Hermione...

If anyone would have asked him at the beginning of the year, Harry would have said that Parvati looked absolutely beautiful and gorgeous... Exactly his type- Sexy, bold and most of all, *alluring* but now... It seemed to have a much different effect on him.

Normally, Harry would have already been drooling at the sight of Parvati and would probably be already looking for the nearest broom-closet to make out with her but somehow... That just wasn't him anymore...

"Well, Harry, sweetie? How do I look?" Parvati asked coyly as Draco silently let Padma drag him inside the hall, too caught in his own thoughts to even bother to protest.

"You look fine." Harry said curtly, rudely yanking his arm away and walking into the Hall abruptly, biting back his irritation when Parvati hurried after him, undaunted, before she slipped her arm through his, looking around with a proud smile on her face.

The first thing Harry had noticed was that the House tables had all vanished, leaving a large space in the center of the room for dancing while a several hundred smaller tables had been scattered around the room large enough to accommodate four people.

He saw that in the very front of the room where the High table for the professors had once been, instead had been replaced with a slightly larger table big enough to fit about a dozen and a half people, obviously for the champions later on.

In front of that table was a stage in which the Weird sisters, the popular Wizing band that Dumbledore had managed to book for the Ball, were already setting up and starting to play some dance songs as they waited.

Some of the tables, Harry noticed, were already occupied by the students already there while some of the others were still mingling around with the other guests, greeting each other and exchanging comments.

As he glanced up, he saw that there were hundreds of garlands of mistletoes and ivy floating amidst the beautiful starry ceiling enchanted to look like the night outside, seeming to add more the atmosphere as several gold and silver magical glitters swirled around the entire hall.

Looking around, Harry also couldn't help but notice that though the students were required to wear formal attires, their professors were wearing formal dress robes, all of them gathered in front and talking with the other judges.

The walls of the Great Hall were decorated with a sparkling silver frost, giving the room a romantic, magical atmosphere about it with help from the glitters.

Harry glanced around once more as he led Parvati to the table Draco and Padma were already sitting in, ignoring how Parvati was waving and smiling like some popular Quidditch player next to him.

He couldn't help noticing as well that none of the Beauxbatons students had arrived yet, as well as Durmstrang since the hall was filled with Hogwarts students only but looking around, he saw, with relief that Hermione wasn't there yet.

He did, however, manage to see Pansy Parkinson and Lila Perrine glaring very hatefully at the Patil twins just as Harry sat down beside Draco, who was now drinking a bottle of butterbeer very sullenly to himself.

Crabbe and Goyle had also walked into the room, looking somewhat very ridiculous in their tux with their huge hulking physiques as Millicent clung to Crabbe's huge arm. She was in fact, wearing, in Harry's opinion, the most hideous, dark green gown he had ever seen.

Catching sight of the Gryffindors walking into the room, he spun his head around to see Weasley and Finnegan both walking over to a

table with Lavender Brown and Mandy Brocklehurst both respectively clinging on their arms in gowns of blue and pink.

Draco barely even noticed Weasley walk into the room, downing his bottle of butterbeer before opening a second one, ignoring the annoyed, disgruntled looks Padma was giving him from across the table.

Looking intently, he noticed once again that Hermione wasn't with her Gryffindor friends, causing him to frown his eyebrows in question but Parvati seemed to notice his searching gaze, looking at him intently and tugging onto his hand.

"Harry! Baby, come on, let's dance! This is a great song!" She exclaimed in false enthusiasm, indicating to the upbeat tune the Weir sisters had started playing in front.

Harry yanked his arm away roughly, not even looking at her as he kept his eyes trained on the entrance doors to the Great Hall, growling at annoyance.

"Then go dance by yourself." He snapped impatiently, his emerald eyes flashing briefly before he turned back to his searching, noticing that the Beauxbatons lot had finally entered the room.

He saw Fleur Delacour entering the room, looking simply stunning in her sexy, flowing silver gown while being accompanied by an ecstatic Roger Davies, the handsome Ravenclaw Quidditch captain for that year.

Harry didn't let his gaze linger on her long, watching the entrance doors and not noticing the dark, hateful glare Parvati was giving him from across him, her eyes glinting in indignation and anger.

"Draco? You want to dance?" Padma asked seductively, causing Draco to finally look back at her, raising an eyebrow in irritation.

"Look... If you and your sister want to dance so much, why don't you *both* dance *together*?" He retorted dryly, sneering coldly at her but Padma ignored his angry tone of voice, grabbing his arm for attention.

Draco opened his mouth to snap something at the girl again but the words soon died on his lips as he saw caught sight of Blaise conversing lightly with a group of Ravenclaws, a pigtailed girl wearing a lacy yellow, strapless gown on his arm.

“Bloody fucking hell...” He cursed out loud, his silver eyes widening in both shock and disgust just as Harry snapped his head back to look at him in question, raising an eyebrow curiously.

“What? What is it?” He asked, following Draco’s shocked gaze too see Blaise talking with a group of people with none other than Hufflepuff *Hannah Abbott* hanging onto his arm, the petite girl gazing up at the boy with love and adoration shining in her eyes.

Blaise seemed to notice this and looked back down at her, giving her a loving smile in return before he leaned down to give her a brief kiss on the lips, causing the Ravenclaws they were talking with to smile at the tender scene.

Harry and Draco both sputtered in horror as some of the Hufflepuffs who had witnessed this had gasped in shock and utter disbelief but Blaise and Hannah ignored them, the happy couple glowing as they excused themselves from the conversation.

Draco couldn’t help it... He let out his famous malicious Malfoy sneer and glared threateningly at Blaise, looking at him as though he had betrayed him somehow.

“Hey Zabini! What’s wrong?! No other girls want to take you anymore that you actually became pathetic enough to touch, much less, *kiss* a freakin *Hufflepuff*?!” He yelled out loudly, drawing Blaise’s attention to him as he and Harry burst out into smirks, Parvati and Padma giggling next to them.

“Yeah! We’re disappointed at you, Zabini! We thought you had a good head on your shoulders! This secret girl you’ve been seeing is this *Hufflepuff*?! That’s low...” Harry drawled out in both disgust and anger, giving their housemate a warning glare.

Blaise watched as Hannah seemed to tear up beside him, turning away so neither Harry or Draco could see them and the sight of her

was enough to make Blaise's gray eyes flash dangerously in anger at the Slytherin duo.

Glowing with fury, he strode over to them, ignoring the shocked, cautious stares the other Slytherins gave him as he dared to contradict the well-feared Slytherin duo, intent on giving them a piece of his mind.

Growling, he grabbed Draco by the front of his tux, lifting the blonde from his seat and lifting him from the floor with a cold, threatening glare as he heard some of the people in the room gasp in shock.

"Don't speak about my girlfriend that way, Malfoy! You may be my housemate but I wouldn't hesitate to punch your lights out anytime!" Blaise snapped at him, the look on his face informing Draco that he was dead serious.

Draco just sneered back, gingerly removing Blaise's hands from his tux and dusting it off as though he had dirtied him somehow, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"I'm *quivering* in fear, Zabini... I'm shaking in my boots. Don't you forget who you're talking to here, Blaise." Draco threatened in dark sarcasm, nodding in signal to someone behind him, causing Blaise to whirl around and see Harry stand up slowly from his chair and saunter over to him with a similar dark glare in his face.

Blaise just snorted, looking back and forth between them, not at all looking impressed or intimidated. "What? The *Slytherin duo* are going to beat the living crap out of me? Is that it? You forget, *Malfoy*, I'm *still* a Slytherin too and I'm not at all afraid of you *or* Potter." He answered sarcastically, grabbing the front of Draco's tux again in fury.

The others watched nervously as Draco's eyes glinted in dark anger, causing some of the other students to back away from the fight scene, not wanting to get involved in any way of angering the feared pair.

"Don't be a fool, Zabini... You of all people, should know what me and Draco are capable of doing. Don't you piss us off, it won't put you into an easy situation... As most of the people here know already." Harry threatened in a scarily calm hiss behind him.

“You think that scares me, Potter?! What is this, a two on one?! You and Malfoy are not man enough to fight your battles alone?!” Blaise retorted, not releasing his hold on Draco.

“Would you three stop it?! You’re making a scene!” AJ screamed at them from where she was with Cedric but the three barely heard her, glaring daggers at each other.

“Don’t *touch* me, Blaise... I don’t know where those hands have been... I don’t want any Hufflepuff germs on me. *You* might have turned out to be a wuss but I most certainly still despise those them for the losers they all are.” Draco spat out angrily, shoving him away.

Blaise’s eyes flashed in anger again as he lunged for Draco but Harry grabbed him and held the boy back, not wanting his two housemates to cause a fight scene in the middle of the Great Hall and embarrass their house.

“Zabini, just go... Just go with your *girlfriend*, we don’t to see your face right now... Just *leave*.” Harry interrupted sharply, stepping in between the two boys to prevent them from fighting in front of everyone.

Frankly, if it were up to him, he would have loved to see a fist fight between Draco and Blaise but seeing that they were in front of the whole school, he wasn’t about to let them embarrass their house just because of a Hufflepuff girl.

Blaise seemed to take the hint as he pulled himself away from Harry’s grasp, giving Draco another furious look which Draco returned with mocking smile of his own, throwing a smirk at Hannah behind Blaise.

“I’m surprised at you, Zabini... After all, you were the one who hated Hufflepuffs the worst... How terribly amusing that you should find yourself whipped by one—”

“You shut the fuck up, Malfoy!” Blaise yelled angrily at him, his eyes blazing with undeniable rage.

“You’re a traitor, Zabini... You disgust me. You don’t deserve to be a Slytherin... Falling for a no good, dirty and pathetic

Hufflepuff...You're probably the only Slytherin I know that would actually date those losers...I thought you had better taste in women. I mean, you had a lot of other girls going for you and you—"

"Draco, would you please stop it?! Leave him alone! It's *his* choice, *not* yours! You have no right to try and control him like that! Why do you always have to be such a goddamn jerk?!" AJ shouted angrily at him, her eyes glinting furiously as she watched, drawing the two boys' attention to her finally.

Seeing the blazing look in her eyes, Draco finally stopped and paled, feeling as though she had just struck him right in the chest. He opened his mouth to answer her but Blaise grabbed his collar and pulled his face towards his to hiss something dangerously in his ear, interrupting him before he got a chance to say something.

"Listen to her, Malfoy... The girl you *love* is telling you right now how much of a godforsaken asshole you are... Need I say more?! You know...Just because AJ finally had the brains to choose a 'pathetic' *Hufflepuff* like Diggory over you, doesn't mean you could pour out your insecurities on me." He hissed angrily with a sarcastic smile on his lips, gesturing to where AJ was watching them nervously with Cedric beside her.

Draco finally shut up at this, clenching his jaw in anger as he couldn't think of anything else to say, his silver eyes blazing into Blaise's gray ones in fury at the harsh, stinging insult.

"I thought so..." Blaise hissed again, giving him an angry sneer before he shoved him away, straightening his tux and running a hand through his now neatly combed, unspiked hair before turning his back and walking back to his date.

"I always knew you had a soft spot for Hufflepuffs, Zabini...I always thought you hated them even more than we did." Harry said darkly as Blaise passed him, causing the boy to whirl around and face him with a serious look in his eyes.

"I thought so too, Potter... And I still do hate most Hufflepuffs. It's just that..." His voice trailed off as he looked at Hannah again, who gave him a small smile, her eyes sparkling.



"I love Hannah." He admitted loud enough for everyone to hear, causing Hannah's eyes to tear before he walked back to her again, pulling her off into the dance floor just as the Weird sisters struck up a romantic melody.

Harry's eyes suddenly clouded over as he watched Blaise, secretly wishing that he could have been as brave as the other boy was in admitting out loud how he felt about the girl he cared about...

Though he would never admit it to anyone... The reason he had snapped at Blaise was different from Draco's... He had snapped at him because Blaise's daringness to admit his feelings publicly seemed to mock him for being the coward he was, angering him even more.

Seeing the happy, contented look on Blaise's face pissed him off even more and made him wish now more than ever that Hermione was in his arms... That Hermione was accompanying *him* to the Ball...Made him wish that he too would have the girl he loved beside him...

*Does he have to rub it in my fucking face?!* Harry thought angrily, his eyes flashing as he sat stiffly back down their table after Draco. The blonde barely noticed, now stung and ashen-faced as Blaise's words began echoing again and again in his mind.

Extremely irritated, Harry began glaring at everyone watching until the atmosphere reluctantly resumed back to normal, everyone returning to what they had been doing. "Blaise and bloody Abbott... Hogwarts' new sweetest couple." Harry said sarcastically, sneering as he saw the couple slow-dancing in the middle of the dance floor.

Growling under his breath, he narrowed his eyes in bitterness as he silently cursed Blaise for making him feel worse than he had before.

It just wasn't fair that Blaise had fixed his love life that easily by finally coming out to everyone publicly while *his* own love life was still a bloody mess thanks to that very same problem Blaise had.

"Let it go... If he wants that Hufflepuff, fine... It's his fucked-up choice anyway." Draco finally mumbled weakly, downing another bottle of

butterbeer silently as he watched their other housemates glare furiously at Blaise, which the Slytherin promptly ignored.

“Well frankly / would never date a Hufflepuff... Zabini has obviously lost his mind! I can’t even believe I ever dated him before!” Padma suddenly chimed in, rolling her eyes.

Parvati smiled at her twin sister in agreement; smiling slyly as she slipped her arm through Harry’s once more, pulling the dazed boy closer. “Well some boys are just clueless when it comes to choosing the perfect girlfriends... Right Harry?” She purred, leaning over and planting a kiss on his cheek.

Harry didn’t respond, though he didn’t pull back either, finding that as much as he found Parvati to be extremely fickle and shallow, the impulses in his young teenage body would somehow always respond when it was tempted the right way.

Parvati seemed to notice this as well as she allowed a triumphant smile on her face when she leaned over and trailed her lips along Harry’s strong jaw line, stopping for a moment above the pulse point in his neck and letting her lips linger there.

Just as Harry found his entire body responding to the girl’s advances, he turned to see the Durmstrang lot finally walking into the Great Hall, all of them looking very distinguished wearing tuxes with their tall confident forms.

Harry felt a strong twinge of suspicion, not even noticing Parvati beside him anymore as he scanned the lot of Durmstrang students, his eyes widening when he saw Viktor Krum in front but widening even more when he saw the stunningly beautiful girl on his arm.

*Hermione...* He thought, his eyes sparkling in unhidden admiration and unmistakably passion as she entered with a beautiful smile on her face wearing a simply beautiful pure white gown that made every single cell in Harry’s body want to reach out and touch her delicate form.

“Whoa... Check Granger out, Potter.” Draco whispered, smirking in amusement as he caught sight of the look on Harry’s face but Harry

barely even registered his voice; too busy staring in concealed and sad admiration at the beautiful girl.

Apparently, everyone seemed to think the same as they stared at the odd, unexpected couple in shock, most of the boys staring quite openly at the girl as Hermione smiled at Krum, causing Harry's heart to squeeze painfully in his chest.

*Krum... Bloody hell, I should have known that smarmy bastard was behind this...* Harry thought darkly, his hand tightening around the wand in his robes, itching to lunge forward, hex Krum with the darkest curse he knew and take back what was rightfully his.

Hermione was just... There was no other word for it except beautiful... Nothing else could have been said... Even Draco couldn't seem to think of a proper insult at the girl at that very moment, a shocked look of unflattering disbelief on his face.

Staring so much at her, Harry failed to notice that Ron and Seamus were both gaping very openly at their best friend from their table, both of them having angry flashes in their eyes.

The rest of the school seemed more shocked by the fact that Hermione was going with Viktor Krum than the fact that she was extremely beautiful in her white ball gown... Something which portrayed innocent and pure, natural beauty... An angel...

Harry watched with a sinking heart as Hermione promptly linked her arm tighter around Krum's arm, ignoring the stares the Hogwarts and Durmstrang students were giving them as she led him over to a nearby table with some of his Durmstrang friends, who all bent down to give her a kiss on the hand.

He wasn't even aware that for once in his life, his jaw was hanging limply as he just allowed himself to stare at her with unmasked admiration in his emerald eyes, surprising some of the other girls when they saw his expression.

Usually Harry and Draco were both known in keeping their cool exterior in times like this, never one to be caught gaping stupidly like a blushing first year since it was always the other way around.

But for once, his was just struck completely speechless and motionless, his pale cheeks flushed with pink and his eyes filled with a sort of dreamy expression in them that made even AJ glance twice at him in surprise and was tempted to take a picture of the once in lifetime look on her twin's face.

Draco saw his look and widened his eyes in surprise, not daring to believe that his best friend, who could easily be even more confident and charming than he was at certain times, was looking completely flustered... All because of Granger...

Hermione seemed to notice Harry's face but she ignored him, barely regarding him with a glance before she turned away to talk to some of the other students, her features glowing exquisitely.

Once again, Harry felt his heart drop painfully for the third time that night since he had entered the Great Hall but he masked himself easily, covering up his sudden inelegant moment with an angry mocking sneer at Krum, who returned it with a smug smile.

He failed to notice the hateful, scathing look on Parvati's face the moment Hermione had entered the hall, rolling her eyes with a hint of loathing on them and turning to whisper something to her sister Padma.

"Hope she realizes how tacky she looks! Ugh, that gown is so unattractive on her." She hissed angrily, her eyes flashing as she glared at the girl but Hermione seemed to be particularly ignoring their table, waving at Ron and Seamus who both managed a weak grimace in response.

"The only ones who look tacky and unattractive here are *you*." AJ mocked derisively as she passed by their table with Cedric, giving Parvati and Padma a cold sneer as she did, causing Harry and Draco to let out a snort of concealed laughter.

Parvati whipped her head around and glared at her as AJ just smiled innocently at her, waving delicately before she walked off, letting Cedric lead her to another one of his friends, one of which looked suspiciously familiar.

Harry however, turned back to watch as Viktor stood up and offered a hand to Hermione, causing her to stand up and curtsy gracefully to him before taking his hand and letting him pull her to the dance floor, her flowing white skirt skimming lightly on the dance floor.

Feeling his heart jump painfully into his throat, Harry roughly snatched the butterbeer bottle Draco had in his hand and began downing it instantly, causing Draco to jump in surprise but shrug, grabbing a new bottle.

Harry violently slammed the now empty bottle down back on the table, causing Parvati to jump as he turned his burning emerald green eyes back at the dancing couple to see Krum swing Hermione carefully, making Harry's jaw clench tightly in pent up anger.

Parvati watched the lightning bolts continue to flash in Harry's eyes, feeling her own eyes start to heat up in anger when she recognized the longing and desire mingled with jealousy in the handsome Slytherin's facial expression.

Then, with a sinking realization, an annoying voice suddenly spoke up in her head, angering Parvati even more as she heard the words it spoke. *Harry's never looked that way at 'you' now, hasn't he? In fact, he's never looked at you with anything more than lust... He's never looked at you the way he looks at Hermione.* The voice hissed maliciously.

Parvati's eyes blazed as she shook the thought away, glaring darkly as the anger seemed to disappear in the raven-haired Slytherin's eyes and was instead, replaced with sadness and something that looked suspiciously as heartbreak.

Furious, Parvati turned to give Hermione one of her meanest glares but the girl didn't even look at her, seeming to hold herself up more confidently now as she ignored every single person in the room staring at her.

*It's just not fair... Harry's one of the most handsome, the most popular and most of all, the most confident boys in the whole school... Why should he waste himself on someone like 'her' when he could have 'me'? I'm his female counterpart...* Parvati thought

angrily. *What does he see in 'her'? She's nothing more than a mudblood— an ordinary and 'boring' witch while 'I'm' a rich, pureblooded, beautiful girl... He belongs with 'me' not with her! She doesn't deserve somebody as perfect as him!* Parvati thought stubbornly, now glaring at her so-called date.

"Seems Krum's got better moves than you now, eh Potter?" Draco whispered to him but Harry only answered him by raising his middle finger up at him in response, directing his anger at the blonde before turning back to watch Hermione.

*Why the fuck is he staring at her?! Can't he see that she doesn't want him?! And that I'm right beside him?! I will not let myself get dumped again for an innocent little geek like Hermione Granger!* Parvati raged, shaking with anger. *She's like a bloody virgin, for crying out loud! She and Harry don't even match together! She could never make him happy like I could! She couldn't satisfy him the way I can! 'I' deserve to be Harry's girlfriend! He's mine and you can't have him, Granger!* Parvati silently screamed as she finally grabbed Harry's hand from the table.

Harry yanked his hand out of her grasp immediately, whipping his head around to growl at her in annoyance. "*What?!*" He snarled, his eyes glinting malevolently, dark green flames smoldering in those emerald orbs, causing Parvati's eyes to glaze over in desire for the handsome Slytherin.

*Harry's absolutely perfect... He's, rich, sophisticated... Sexy, confident and popular but most of all, he's drop-dead-gorgeous... He's my type... He belongs to 'me'.* She thought possessively as she stood up and grabbed his arm again, dragging him up.

"Come on, let's dance." She said, determined more than ever to show Hermione and everyone else that Harry belonged to her and that *she* was Harry's date.

Harry opened his mouth to protest angrily but Parvati wouldn't hear it, yanking his arm towards the dance floor, knowing the Slytherin wouldn't protest once they were in the middle for fear of making a humiliating scene of walking back.

Padma took a lead from her twin's example and was about to do the same when a small silver dragon-shaped pendant hanging from Draco's neck seemed to growl fiercely at her, immediately causing Draco to snap his silver eyes at her in suspicion.

"Just what is that *frightening* pendant you're wearing?" Padma demanded as the dragon growled again, straining against the chain it hung from Draco's neck as it tried lunging for her but Draco only narrowed his eyes even more, glaring at her.

"I'm going to get another drink." He said abruptly before he pushed his chair back and stood up, heading for the refreshment table as he promptly held Fierros tightly in his hand, stopping it from growling immediately.

Harry watched him go for a minute from where he was dancing with Parvati in the middle of the dance floor, barely paying attention to the girl he was holding as his eyes followed Hermione everywhere, watching miserably as Krum spun the beautiful girl around in a graceful turn.

He visibly stiffened when the couple began dancing towards their direction, looking away hastily as he accidentally caught Hermione's eye, pretending to be watching the Weird sisters play on the stage.

Parvati saw Hermione and Krum passing by as she waved in false cheerfulness to Viktor, who waved back, beaming happily at her whereas Hermione just set her lips into a firm line, not saying anything.

Parvati smiled smugly and took that very moment to yank Harry towards her, catching the Slytherin off guard for a moment when she had pressed her lips onto his in a firm kiss, causing Hermione's face to cloud over in anger and disgust as she pulled out of Krum's arms and began steering him back to their table.

Harry, still dazed in surprise, just stood there for a single minute before he pushed Parvati roughly away, narrowing his eyes at her in annoyance. "Patil, would you spare me the humiliation?! If that's all you want then I probably should have just brought you to my bedroom!" He growled scathingly, his form tensing.

Parvati blinked, taken back by the rude insult. "Now just what is *that* supposed to mean, Harry?" She snapped back angrily.

Harry didn't even bother answering, his eyes searching around for Hermione again but when he saw her back at their table, he just sighed, cursing under his breath and pulling Parvati back to their table where Padma was sulking in annoyance.

Draco looked relieved as Harry sat back down beside him, gesturing for him to lean closer so he could hiss something into his ear. "I swear Potter, you have the *worst* taste in women..." He hissed angrily as Harry just shrugged, taking the bottle of butterbeer Draco offered him and downing it quickly.

"So what's up with you and Granger? Did she shoot you down already for Krum?" He whispered again so that only Harry could hear, smirking in amusement.

Harry snapped his head back to glare at him, giving him a threatening glare. "Leave it alone, Malfoy." He said coldly before he turned back, clutching the bottle of butterbeer tighter as he watched Krum and Hermione laugh at something they were talking about.

Harry couldn't bear to see her so happy with another... The sight of it was making the knife in his back twist over and over and over again, reminding him of his own stupid mistake.

But what had surprised him even more was the fact that instead of wanting to go towards them and rip Krum's limbs off him piece by piece, he couldn't have cared less, feeling more heartbreak than jealousy.

He still wanted to tear the fucking asshole apart with his own bare hands but the feeling of rejection and misery was easily the dominant feeling he was experiencing right now other than malice and hatred. He hated it...

*I hope I at least get a chance to give her her Christmas present...* He thought, watching with a bitter look in his eyes as Hermione laughed again, the simple, beautiful sound piercing right through his gut.



“Hey look, there’s Oliver Wood! Let’s go talk to him!” Cedric exclaimed, immediately dragging AJ off once again to where Oliver was conversing with some of Cedric’s seventh year friends, causing AJ to wince in annoyance.

Ever since they had entered the Great Hall, they had doing nothing more than talk and mingle with all of Cedric’s seventh-year buddies and their dates and AJ had been forced to paste a smile on her face the whole night as Cedric introduced her over and over and over again.

She had a feeling that by the time this night was over, she would know each and every witch or wizard in the Graduating class by their names and faces, seeing as that Cedric had made sure she got the names of all his friends.

He didn’t seem to notice AJ’s exasperated look as he continued to chat with his friends the whole night with AJ just holding his arm and doing nothing more but nod, smile and laugh, muttering the phrase, “Nice to meet you..” repeatedly.

She had somehow forgotten that her partner was the Yule Ball was not only a Hogwarts champion for the tournament but was also known as this years “Mr. *fucking* Congeniality” meaning he was friends with the damn year!

What was worse, whenever Cedric had introduced her to his friends, the majority of the girl partners of his friends would look at her curiously, raising an eyebrow as they asked, “*Aren’t you a ‘fourth-year’ Slytherin?*” which had never failed to make AJ flush as she nodded.

And of course, there was always the never-forgotten, famous question of all time that probably pissed her off the worst... “You’re Harry Potter’s twin sister, aren’t you?”

She had never felt so much like a fucking child before... It seemed all the seventh years talked about nothing but their future careers and their choice of work, which of course, was something she had absolutely no idea what to answer to.

And it all didn't seem to be ending as Cedric seemed to have different friends in every single damn house except for Slytherin, even talking occasionally to some Hogwarts graduates that AJ didn't even know.

She couldn't help feel as though she was in some kind of grown-up party which the guests did nothing more than talk, talk, talk and introduce themselves to each other over and over again... It was getting really tiring and boring.

And to top it all off, Cho Chang, who had gone with a good-looking blonde Beauxbatons boy, had been shooting her a poisonous glare all night as though she had killed her favorite dog or something and it was really starting to get on her nerves.

She knew for a fact that Cedric still had pretty much, strong, feelings for Cho and that his feelings were obviously returned as Cho seemed pretty much to look at him with longing but for some stupid reason, the girl was denying everything up until now.

But the worst feeling she probably felt was when she saw Padma hanging off Draco's arm, causing her stomach to lurch forward dangerously when she saw the complete adoration shining in the other girl's eyes.

She didn't know why she had never noticed it before now, as though seeing him for the first time, she finally realized that Draco was extremely handsome... It was as if a mask had been removed from her eyes and she was seeing him clearly now...

It wasn't some normal physical attraction but for some strange reason, it seemed as though she couldn't take her eyes off him the entire night and it was as if she couldn't see anyone else, not even Ron or Cedric, but him...

As though everything else around them was completely dull and lifeless and Draco was the only one she could see vividly... The only one who looked real and full of life and it was driving her completely insane!

Furious with herself, she wrenched her eyes away from him and forced her gaze on Ron, who was staring at her in awe, his jaw

hanging open in desire while Lavender watched him with a hurt, rejected look on her features.

Flashing a seductive smile, AJ winked at him enticingly, causing the redhead to blink and return the look with a lopsided grin before AJ looked back to where Cedric was dragging her off once again towards the handsome former Gryffindor.

“Hey Wood! Welcome back to Hogwarts!” He greeted, taking the hand Oliver offered him as the two exchanged a handshake, Oliver clapping Cedric’s shoulder lightly with a grin.

“Thanks Diggory. Congratulations on being the champion by the way, just to tell you, I’m rooting for *you* mate.” He told him, wincing in dislike as he gestured to Harry, who was sitting with Draco, glaring darkly at anyone who passed them, causing others to move away from the champion in intimidation.

“Potter is a pretty dark wizard... I wouldn’t fancy it if *he* won for Hogwarts.” Oliver whispered to him, grimacing again as he saw the sudden angry blaze in AJ’s eyes when she heard them, glaring at Oliver.

Cedric shifted uncomfortably at the tension, finally noticing the pretty redheaded girl clad in who had her arm linked through Oliver’s own and using that chance to ease the uneasiness in the conversation.

“Hmm.... Wood, who might this gorgeous girl be accompanying you?” Cedric asked, smiling charmingly as he offered a hand to the girl, who smiled and slipped her own gloved-clad arm through his and let him give it a kiss.

Oliver laughed, rolling his eyes at Cedric’s gentlemanly traditions and behaviors before answering. “Oh, sorry, Cedric, this is my girlfriend, Briana. We met a couple of months ago and she’s the reason I’m back here.” He explained, grinning.

Cedric looked confused, giving Briana a questioning look as she laughed and slipped her hand out of his grasp, smiling. “I work for the *Daily Prophet* and I was assigned to cover the Yule Ball for my next article so I’m here on business.” She explained.

*“Daily Prophet?”* Well now, impressive...Wow...I see, well, it’s a pleasure meeting you Briana.” Cedric said sincerely, giving her another charming smile.

“The pleasure is mine, Cedric.” She answered back as Oliver offered a slightly reluctant hand to AJ, who was still glaring darkly at him.

“Ah... AJ Potter, we meet again and may I say you look absolutely stunning.” He said charismatically, bending down to kiss the gloved hand AJ had reluctantly slipped through his.

“Charmed, I’m sure.” She replied with another forced smile, wanting nothing more than to go and sit with her twin for the rest of the night. “AJ Potter? Well that’s definitely a surprise...It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Briana said, smiling at her as she offered the younger girl a hand, which AJ had shook slightly, returning the smile.

Fortunately, Prof. McGonagall seemed to hear her silent prayer as she stood on the stage in the front of the room. “Champions over here please!” She yelled out, catching the attention of the dancers in the middle as they all sat back down to watch.

“Well, we’ll see you later then.” Cedric said, giving the couple one last smile before he led AJ over to where the other champions were already gathering on the stage where Dumbledore stood waiting dressed in fancy dress robes with bright moons designed all around it.

AJ once again, pasted the well-practiced smile on her face as Cedric led her up the stage, grimacing slightly when she saw her twin brother already there with Parvati clinging tightly to his arm, beaming and smiling like a movie star.

She seemed to be enjoying the attention more than Harry as she promptly waved to her friends with a huge smile on her face, obviously very pleased with herself for being the partner of one of the leading champions.

She saw Hermione Granger with Krum, smiling, though rather shyly at the crowd, finally allowing AJ to notice that the girl’s front teeth had finally been reduced and as much as she hated to admit it, the Gryffindor was one of the most beautiful girls there.

Krum seemed to think so too as he seemed to hold himself up proudly glowing with admiration for her, the usual sulking scowl on his face replaced with a small, proud half-smile, looking very sophisticated in his stylish tux.

Cedric gently led her to their place beside Harry and Parvati where he also smiled at the crowd of students watching, his eyes lingering on the angry look on Cho's face, much to AJ's secret amusement.

Harry of course, was once again masking his bad mood by his usual confident smirk, an eyebrow raised in slight boredom as most of the students, particularly the girls, appeared to be cheering loudly for *him*.

*Looks like Harry's the favorite...* AJ thought, smiling to herself as she shot her twin a grin, which he only returned weakly before forming his handsome face into a smirk again, briefly readjusting the earring Draco had given him before yawning to himself.

AJ looked among the other tables and noticed that another Slytherin, a good-looking seventh year boy and his other Ravenclaw partner, had joined Draco and Padma and was conversing lightly with the blonde, both of them looking uninterested as they watched.

Seeing her looking at them however, Draco's face lit up for a brief moment as he gave her a small, remorseful smile, which AJ allowed herself to return easily but her eyebrows fused together when Draco had looked sharply away, his eyes suddenly clouding over in a strange feeling of sadness.

AJ looked confused at this for a minute before she caught sight of Ron, who lifted his lips into a sideways grin at her, raising a bottle of butterbeer for a brief moment which AJ could only return with a weak nod, now feeling more confused than ever.

"Happy Christmas to everyone... I'd like to welcome you all, Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang into our Yule Ball.. Now, I trust you are all enjoying yourselves?" Dumbledore asked out loud, beaming.

A chorus of cheers and applause broke out among the other seated students, causing Dumbledore to smile in delight, his eyes twinkling merrily.

“Wonderful! Before anything else, I would like to comment on how absolutely charming and beautiful everyone looks this evening... I’ve never been in a room filled with such many beautiful *young* people before.” He said, winking at them as the students laughed in response.

Harry smirked from where he was on the stage in amusement, shaking his head at the headmaster’s antics.

“You all look like such fine young gentlemen and beautiful young ladies... I certainly hope you all like the band?” Dumbledore asked, gesturing to the popular Wizarding group as the students cheered loudly again in response.

“Ah... That would be a yes... Now before we start serving out the food, I’d like to welcome all our champions and their partners here tonight formally so if you would all please...” Dumbledore said, gesturing to the champions.

The students broke out into a loud applause when the champions had stepped forward again, acknowledging the applauses with bright smiles, or in Harry’s case, a curt nod.

“Okay then... I won’t keep you all waiting any longer... Champions, if you’d all follow me to the Top table with the other judges and our honored guests... The rest of you, enjoy yourselves!” Dumbledore beamed, everyone clapping again as he led the champions and their partners down the stage towards the Top table where the other judges were already waiting.

Harry couldn’t help noticing that besides the teachers and the judges, he caught sight of Percy Weasley, Ron’s older graduate brother, sitting in Barty Crouch’s, one of the judges, place, looking very pleased with himself.

Sighing, Harry let Parvati yank him towards the seat right next to Percy, sitting down immediately and engaging Fleur in a light

conversation as AJ gingerly sat down in the seat across from him, Cedric pulling back her chair for her politely as she did, a gesture that Harry himself did not bother doing for Parvati.

*What a night this is going to be...* He thought, moodily snatching the menu on his place and scanning the list for something worth picking at for the next hour, ignoring the laughter Hermione and Krum seemed to be giving off just several seats from his.

"Harry!! You absolutely have to eat some more!" Parvati whined as Harry once again began picking at his chosen plate of roast beef, not at all hungry as he watched Hermione and Krum with a dark look in his eyes.

"So Potter... Pretty interesting way of conquering that Horntail." Percy Weasley commented casually from beside him, drawing Harry's attention back to the older redheaded wizard in annoyance.

Harry regarded him with a raised eyebrow, managing a smirk to cover his mood with confidence, trying hard to ignore Ludo Bagman's beaming grin at him from where he sat near the three headmasters and the judges.

"Naturally Weasley... I'm a Potter *and* a Slytherin." He answered smugly, taking a sip from his goblet of juice, not catching Percy's annoyed look as he rolled his eyes at Harry's arrogance.

"Incredibly modest too, if I would admit... Enjoying the Ball so far?" Percy asked, trying to strike up a friendly conversation with the Slytherin.

Harry just rolled his eyes, shaking his head furiously when Parvati had offered him a bite of her salad as the girl just shrugged, turning back to talk to Fleur beside her.

"Frankly that's none of your business, Weasley... What are *you* doing here anyway?" He asked snobbishly, remembering that the former Gryffindor had graduated the year before.

Percy seemed undaunted however, as he shrugged and took a sip from his own goblet, examining his fingernails casually.

"Well, *I've* been promoted, Potter. I am here now as Mr. Crouch's personal assistant to represent him since he couldn't make it tonight." He answered, looking incredibly pleased with himself.

Harry just raised an eyebrow, unimpressed before he smirked and raised his goblet of his lips again. "I see.... Why couldn't the old man come this time?" He asked, snorting in amusement as Percy narrowed his eyes at him at the implied crack about his superior.

"*Mr. Crouch*, still pretty young I can assure you, felt rather nasty and couldn't seem to make it tonight ... After all, the man is overworked enough, the brilliant mind he has so far. It seems the whole house-elf incident at the Quidditch world cup still has him stressed badly enough to dismiss his elf but I'm sure *you* wouldn't know what that's about so I won't bother you with the information." Percy said, raising an eyebrow at Harry.

"Oh yeah? Try me... You'd be surprised..." Harry said darkly, his interest now piped up as he listened to the former Gryffindor beside him, narrowing his eyes in curiosity.

Percy seemed to consider the thought for a minute before shrugging and allowing an amused smile.

"What harm could it do... Mr. Crouch is currently swamped with so much workload over the past weeks that he took his well-needed rest this Christmas... Everything seems to be piling up on him with the Tournament, the aftermath of the cup and that annoying Skeeter woman around... Of course he can always count on *me* to do his work." Percy said self-righteously, giving Harry a grin.

"I'm sure he could..." Harry muttered in annoyance, silently agreeing with Percy about how much of a nuisance that Skeeter reporter has been lately... He's even heard from Hagrid that currently she's been after him and he couldn't help but raise his suspicions yet again.

"Harry... Sweetie, won't you eat some more? You need your strength...I don't want you starving yourself" Parvati cooed again, slipping an arm around him as Harry stiffened in annoyance but didn't bother pulling away.



Sighing, he looked across from him, seeing Cedric talk animatedly with AJ, who was laughing in amusement at something they were talking about, shaking her head at him ruefully.

“Okay, you promise not to get all bigheaded about it?” AJ asked, giving Cedric a pointed look as Cedric widened his eyes in mock innocence, playfully using his finger to draw a cross on his chest.

AJ rolled her eyes at his antics, chuckling but she sighed and turned to him with a sheepish smile. “Fine... I... sorta had a crush on you back in my third year—”

Seeing Cedric’s shocked grin, she widened her eyes and shook her head hastily at him, lightly hitting him on the head in annoyance. “No, you prick! It’s gone now, I can assure you! It was only a small infatuation.. I mean, after all, who *hasn’t* developed a crush on you?” She added hastily, rolling her eyes.

Cedric laughed good-naturedly with modest blush, nodding before he raised his goblet to take a small sip, grinning at her afterwards. “Don’t worry about it, Amanda, I sort of fancied you for a short time too but it’s gone as well. I just think you’re a great girl, it’s an innocent friendship really.” He assured her, smiling.

AJ looked visibly relieved, nodding as she raised a forkful of her food to her lips, taking a small bite before Harry finally tuned their conversation out, silently thankful that Diggory wasn’t planning anything for his twin.

However, Harry narrowed his eyes in anger again when he caught sight of Hermione across the table from him with Viktor Krum, the couple sitting near Dumbledore and Karkaroff as the Durmstrang headmaster kept shooting warning looks at his champion.

“Really? Well what does Durmstrang look like?” Hermione asked, looking at Krum curiously as she fused her eyebrows together in question.

Krum, to Harry’s surprise but much more, *annoyance*, was now beaming and glowing with happiness, not at all looking like the surly,

glaring boy everyone had known him to be during their entire stay there.

“Well it is also a very big castle but Hogwarts is obviously much bigger if I were to compare the two... We also only have four floors in the castle but unlike Hogwarts, our grounds are much bigger for flying around in summer. The mountains and the—”

“Now Viktor, try to keep from telling your beautiful date here *too* much information.” Karkaroff interrupted with a slight twinge of nervousness in his voice. “After all, we *do* like to keep our privacy for a reason you know.” He added, chuckling.

Krum seemed put out to be interrupted but Hermione smiled and shrugged, raising another fork of her dinner to her lips as she met Dumbledore’s amused gaze.

“Now Igor... Why all the secrecy? I take it your lot are not too keen on visitors?” He asked, giving the other headmaster a smile.

“Well Dumbledore, we Durmstrang students all tend to be very protective of our property... We like the idea that no one else knows anything about our school except for us.” Karkaroff answered casually, a grim smile on his face.

“Oh come now, Igor... I myself can’t say that I already know all of Hogwarts’ secrets... Why just this morning, I took a wrong turn while heading for the bathroom and ended up in a room filled with beautiful chamber pots, However, when I came back the next morning I discovered it was gone... I take it perhaps it only appears either in 5:30 in the morning or when the seeker has a full bladder.” Dumbledore said, beaming.

Harry couldn’t help it... He snorted in laughter at the look of utter bewilderment shocked confusion on Karkaroff’s face, not at all used to seeing the serious headmaster with a shocked grimace.

Dumbledore gave him a small secret wink but Karkaroff, Krum and surprisingly, Hermione gave him an angry glare, but it was only Hermione’s he met for a full minute however, seeing the hate in her eyes, he returned it with a sneer and turned away.

Harry clenched his hands tightly before he turned away from the couple, managing to see Fleur criticizing the Hogwarts decorations and castles to Roger Davies, whom, to Harry's obvious amusement, kept missing his mouth with his fork as he stared at her.

He failed to notice the death glares Parvati and AJ were exchanging at the table, looking intently at Hermione again as she began teaching Krum how to say her name properly, obviously fed up with "Hermy-own".

"It's Her-my-oh-nee, Viktor. *Her-my-oh-nee*." She said very slowly and very carefully, pronouncing each syllable in an exaggerated manner as Krum listened carefully.

"Herm-own-ninny?" Krum asked, looking more confused than ever before as Harry smirked maliciously in amusement at him, his emerald eyes sparkling in mirth.

"Close enough I guess..." Hermione said, sighing in defeat before she grinned and shrugged, looking up and somehow managing to lock gazes with Harry, seeing his smirk. Instantly, her brown eyes momentarily clouded in anger again but Harry snapped his head away sharply as though he had been stung, growling under his breath.

Once all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore grinned and gestured for all the champions to get up just as the Weird sisters climbed back up on the stage to start another song, the lights in the hall suddenly dimming.

Harry snapped out of his dark, angry daze as he noticed all the other champions and their partners standing up, each pair illuminated by separate white spotlights for everyone to see them.

"Come on, Harry, we're supposed to dance!" Parvati purred, linking her arm through the handsome Slytherin's before pulling him up, a proud beaming smile on her face as she took in all the envious girls glaring at her.

Harry finally plastered another smirk on his face as he stood up swiftly, walking his confident stride towards the middle of the now

empty dance floor with the other champions, a beaming, glowing Parvati clinging to his arm.

He noticed that the spotlight on him had followed them all the way from the top table to the dance floor, allowing the other students to see the haughty, smug smile on Parvati's face at being his selected partner for the ball.

He briefly caught sight of some of Parvati's giggly friends waving to her from their table, shooting her pouts of disappointment which Parvati returned with a giggle, obviously pleased with the attention she was receiving and Harry couldn't help but feel annoyed by it.

*It seems that if I'm using her for lust, 'she's' using me for 'fame'...* He suspected for a brief moment before he shook the thought away, not wanting to add to his already dark mood.

Parvati flashed him one of her gorgeous smiles before Harry finally took a cue from the other champions and wrapped his arm around the girl's slender waist, his other arm intertwining with hers.

Parvati's eyes sparkled happily as she placed her hand delicately on Harry's firm shoulder before Harry began steering her into a slow, graceful dance, his eyes not on his own partner but on resting longingly on Hermione, who was dancing nearby with Krum.

He failed to notice that Hermione was still watching him with unreadable eyes as he noticed that the other students watching the champions in the hall were now quiet, listening to the music and watching the champions dance on the dance floor.

Chuckling to himself, he let his gaze linger to where most of the Slytherins sat together in nearby tables in the corner of the room in which he saw most of his upper year friends nodding at him and raising their eyebrows teasingly.

Harry returned it with a small grin and a brief nod before he spotted Draco, who was now watching the scene very carefully with a hint of... There was no doubt about it, there was definitely a hint of sadness on his eyes that was directed at AJ and Cedric.

Harry watched his best friend carefully as Draco shook his head to clear the emotions away and instead, glared darkly at the other Hogwarts champion in anger, his eyes flashing like bolts.

He couldn't help it... He had been the blonde Slytherin's best friend for years and he knew that what Draco hated most of all from other people was when they betrayed his trust, his friendship or his loyalty to them.

Draco was definitely a great friend to have and he stood by Harry ever since their first year through all the shit they had put themselves into... What seemed to surprise Harry the most was that all Draco asked for in return for the friendship, protection and camaraderie he gave him was *loyalty*.

Loyalty and companionship on part of their friendship... This was of course, something Harry had found out about him after three years but he knew that most people would find this extremely hard to believe about Draco so he kept it to himself.

And somehow, he knew that Draco expected the same from the people he loved... *If he loves anyone else, that is...* Harry added, a wry smile on his face.

And now, as he saw the look on his face directed towards his twin sister... No doubt about it... As much as Harry wanted to deny it or how much he wanted to pretend it wasn't there... Draco *did* love his sister very much...

Harry's facial features softened for a moment at the thought but he covered it up when Draco looked up and saw his gaze, managing a weak grin and lifting his goblet up at him in acknowledgement.

Even though a part of Harry still didn't want to let his sister go... He was glad at least, that he knew the next person who was to take care of her loved her very much and that it was his best friend... At least he could trust Draco with her.. It was of course, never in a Malfoy to break the trust of a friend or to break their own words.

Harry shook his head to clear the thoughts away and returned Draco's gesture with a grin of his own, nodding before he twirled

Parvati around in a graceful turn, causing the girl's skirt to swirl for a moment.

"You're a wonderful dancer, Harry..." She purred seductively, loud enough for the other champions, who were dancing nearby, hear them.

AJ, who had passed them with Cedric, turned just as Cedric spun her around as well, giving Parvati a mocking sneer. "Which I think you're wishing you could say the same about yourself." She retorted derisively, causing Hermione, who had heard the comment to hide a smile by biting her lip.

Harry didn't notice, too busy to keep himself from laughing out loud seeing that it could spoil the formality of the silent dance if he did. Parvati glared poisonously at AJ, causing the girl to smile back sweetly and turn back to Cedric.

"Stupid bitch... Don't know what she's talking about... I'm a great dancer." She muttered under her breath so that no one could hear, rolling her eyes in irritation.

After a long moment of waltzing around the wide dance floor, the crowd finally took pity on the champions as several of the other students began leading their partners to the floor as well, couples melting together as a slow song was struck up.

Harry wasn't even looking as Parvati pulled their bodies forcefully together, resting her head on his shoulder in blissful content since he was too busy watching Krum dance very slowly with Hermione, feeling the knife in his chest twist over and over again at the sight.

He saw nothing but red all around him as he saw Hermione rest her head on Krum's shoulder as well, her beautiful brown eyes fluttering shut, causing the anger in Harry's eyes to intensify immensely.

A snarl now visible on his face, Harry looked up and glared very darkly at Krum, wanting nothing more than to storm to where the couple was dancing and wrench his girl away from the bastard and pull her into *his* arms where she rightfully belonged.

He even failed to notice that the dance floor was now filled with other couples as well, Blaise and Hannah dancing nearby and surprisingly enough, Padma and Draco though Draco's eyes were focused intently on AJ, who met his gaze longingly from across the floor.

Even the professors had gotten up and joined them as Dumbledore began waltzing with Madam Maxime, looking very strange indeed with her humongous height and Prof. Snape danced with surprisingly, Prof. McGonagall, looking very reluctant with a scowl.

Harry saw this and managed a weak chuckle as Prof. Snape met his gaze, giving him a dark, warning glare to indicate him to shut up before he turned away once more, shaking his head forlornly.

"Nice moves, Potter. Where did you learn to dance like that?" A gruff voice said, causing Harry to turn his head around and see Prof. Moody dancing with Prof. Sinistra, his magical eye resting on Harry.

"Uh, well... A lot of experience, sir." Harry answered back easily, giving the older wizard a practiced fake smile before turning it back instantly into a scowl when Moody had looked away.

"He is so creepy! I don't think that eye should be allowed!" Parvati whispered to him, snuggling deeper into his arms as Harry just answered by rolling his eyes, spinning her around again.

He was about to snap something at her when they bumped into a couple behind them, causing Harry to spin around wildly and see Viktor Krum glaring back at him with the same dislike.

Instantly, Harry's face forced into a vengeful, mocking sneer as he faced the slightly taller boy, not at all intimidated by his height in the very least.

"Why don't you watch where're you're going?! Don't they teach you to dance properly in that school of yours or do you really just have two left feet?" Harry mocked, his well-known Slytherin sneer in place.

Parvati smiled behind him, proud of her partner but Krum's eyes had narrowed very dangerously into dark slits, several of the other couples moving away from the two boys in fear and caution.

Hermione just watched the two nervously, seeing the familiar glint of wild, uncontrollable dark anger on Harry's face that she had seen one too many times already, causing her to stiffen in panic.

"Just what is your problem Potter? Why are you always such a rude, foul-mouthed jerk? I haven't done anything to you and you keep getting in my way! I—"

"Viktor, come on, just let it go, he's not worth the time to talk to, let's go sit down." Hermione said, interrupting Krum's rant as she gently placed a slender, gloved-clad hand on his arm and pulled him away.

"Don't you turn your back on me, jock boy, don't you know who I am?" He yelled furiously, his hands now clenched into angry, trembling fists that wanted to pound themselves onto Krum's face.

"You are nothing but a mere, attention-seeking child who just cannot find anything else to occupy his mind with except the love to cause trouble to others in an attempt to hide his insecurities." Krum said, causing Harry's anger to flare up even more.

He laughed out loud mockingly, quirking the corner of his lips into a contemptuous half-smirk at Krum whom Hermione was now trying to keep from lunging at him, giving Harry a hateful look of loathing.

"Wow, that was a long sentence! Did you hurt yourself doing that, Krummy-boy?! I didn't know you actually had more words in your vocabulary except 'uh' and 'duh'." Harry retorted with a nasty smile, pronouncing the two words in an exaggerated imitation of Krum's low tone of voice.

Draco, who had been watching the scene, burst out into hysterical laughter the same time Parvati burst into giggles, causing Harry to smirk even wider in response. Krum looked about ready to kill now as his eyes blazed in anger but Hermione continued to hold him back, her gloved hand squeezing his arm gently but firmly.

"Viktor, come on, just let it go. You're right, he's just an immature jerk, we don't have to let him spoil the evening for us." She said, her words seeming to calm Krum as she pulled him away from the Slytherin.



“Aw... How sweet, you let your woman answer back for you... You must have used up all your words already by that sentence. Now you won’t be able to speak for a month!” Harry snapped again, clearly trying to get Viktor to stray away from Hermione.

“Potter, you good-for-nothing jerk, would you just *lay off?!?*” Hermione screamed at him, her brown eyes blazing with a kind of anger Harry had never seen before and it was enough to make him back off in both hurt and nervousness.

Parvati looked surprised when Harry stepped back from the couple, not saying anything except glaring in anger whilst Hermione dragged an angry Krum back to their own table, moving away from Harry as quickly as possible.

“Harry? I don’t understand... Why didn’t you pound him, babe?” Parvati asked in what she thought was a comforting voice, linking her arm through Harry’s and giving him a comforting kiss on the cheek.

Harry just stiffened coldly in anger, pulling his arm out of her grasp and instead, grasping her upper arm so tightly that Parvati had gasped in pain. “Harry, you’re hurting me!” She whined, trying to break free of his death hold but Harry just tightened his grip on her even more, his eyes glinting maliciously.

“Let’s go sit back down, babe. I’m tired.” He spat out curtly, his tone of voice cold and emotionless as he promptly began yanking Parvati around roughly by her arm, the look on his clearly telling Parvati he wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

But still, she had to try. “Already? Oh but I want to dance some more, this is such a great song.” She protested, trying to wrestle her arm away from him but Harry just tightened the arm around her, causing her to wince in pain.

“Harry, you are *hurting* me, dammit! Let me go!” She yelled, now attracting some of the attention of the other dancers around them as they promptly moved away from the couple.

“I don’t like the song. If you still want to dance, then go dance by yourself.” Harry snapped, letting go of her immediately, causing her to

stumble slightly at the push as Harry didn't look back, heading towards a table among the other Slytherins.

Parvati sighed angrily, grasping her arm in pain before she reluctantly followed after his tense form, plopping down in the seat across him next to Padma, whom Draco had led back to the table as well to talk to some of his friends again.

"Quite a scene you made with Krum, Potter." Draco told him as he sat down, indicating to the Durmstrang lot with his goblet of juice allowing Harry to see the glares the Durmstrang students directed at him.

Harry snorted in anger, returning the glares with his Potter sneer, showing them all that he was not in the least scared of the threatening glints in their eyes. "They could all go fuck themselves for all I care, I couldn't give a damn." Harry snapped moodily, slamming his goblet down the table and causing Padma to jump in surprise.

"One question though, Potter... I take it things definitely did not go well with Granger. Instead of looking lovesick for you, she hates your stinking guts even more." Draco commented, sniggering.

Harry didn't bother commenting on Draco's implied question, glaring darkly at Hermione and Krum across the room when a good-looking Beauxbatons boy had come up to their table, smiling charmingly at Parvati.

Parvati took the opportunity as a chance to make her own date jealous by smiling back flirtatiously and slipping her hand into the boy's offered one, shooting a smug look at Harry.

"You don't mind if I dance with another boy, do you, Harry?" She asked sweetly, half-expecting Harry to show his famous Slytherin anger again and pound the Beauxbatons boy into pulp for going near her.

She was surprised when Harry didn't seem to be listening at all, just glaring at something across the room intently, not even noticing the Beauxbatons boy by their table.

“Harry?!” She snapped, this time catching the handsome Slytherin’s attention as he snapped his head back to direct his glare at her, narrowing his eyes when he saw the other boy watching them.

“You’re Harry Potter right?” The Beauxbatons boy asked, suddenly looking very nervous as he eyed the other boy up and down in fear.

“Is it *that* obvious?” Harry retorted sarcastically, taking another sip of his pumpkin juice, not even looking at the boy as he answered.

“Oh well, I’m sorry but I was just asking your lovely date here if I could have one dance with her... I’m not coming onto her, I promise.” He said nervously, giving him a sheepish grin.

Parvati straightened as she saw Harry’s emerald eyes narrow slightly at the other boy as though challenging him before he shrugged flippantly, turning back to glare at whatever he was looking at across the room.

“Have fun, Parv.” He said in a mockingly cheerful tone, this time causing Parvati’s eyes to blaze in indignation at him.

“Harry James Potter, you are absolutely impossible! I don’t even know why I bother!” She shrieked, her face twisting into a horrible snarl of anger at the boy before she let out a sound of frustration and stalked off, grabbing the Beauxbatons boy by the hand with her.

Harry just shrugged, only half-listening as he downed his drink immediately, checking his watch before turning back to the dancers. Draco just laughed at the whole scene, causing Padma to glare angrily at him as well, looking pissed off at the two boys’ attitudes towards them.

Soon after, another Beauxbatons boy had walked over this time to ask Padma to dance and Padma had accepted it immediately, glaring at Draco smugly who just smiled back sweetly, raising his eyebrows in mock innocence.

“You two have got to be the biggest jerks I have ever met! You both obviously don’t know how to take care of good women!” Padma

snapped at them indignantly, causing the Slytherin duo to crack a grin in response.

Padma let out a sound similar to the one her own twin had made earlier before she whipped around and went with the Beauxbatons students, intent on doing her best to make Draco jealous.

Harry's eyes suddenly narrowed as he saw Ludo Bagman bending down to kiss McGonagall's hand before he walked off, obviously trying to avoid the Weasley twins who were trailing after him.

Letting his eyes travel among the sea of dancers, Harry saw that Cedric and AJ were still amongst them, both of them looking locked in a serious conversation while Fleur and Roger Davies danced beside them, both looking incredibly busy to Harry.

Sighing, he turned back and opened one of the bottles of butterbeer on the table, taking another long sip before turning to look as Prof. Snape left the Great Hall looking incredibly pissed with Prof. Karkaroff trailing after him.

*Wonder where Prof. Snape is going...* Harry thought before shrugging and turning to look just as Hermione went over to talk to Ron and Seamus.

AJ watched with an amused smile as Cedric and Cho exchanged longing glances from across the dance floor, strangely reminding her of how she and Draco had looked a while back but she shook the thought away, blushing.

Ever since the dance had started, Cedric hadn't even met her eyes once, looking intently at Cho every time and it was pretty obvious by the look in his eyes that clearly, he wasn't over the pretty Ravenclaw girl yet.

AJ watched, smirking as Cho glared at her darkly once again from where she was dancing nearby with her Beauxbatons date, looking very much jealous and intimidated as Cedric spun AJ around in a turn.

Sighing, she finally shook her head and turned Cedric's face to meet hers again, staring up at him with a pointed look. "Look... Cedric... Can I ask you something?" She asked, raising an eyebrow at the boy's puzzled expression.

Cedric nodded, not saying anything as the curiosity was still clearly evident in his eyes. "Sure, Amanda, what's up? Did I step on your toe or something?" He asked, earning a laugh from the Slytherin.

"Were you telling me the truth when you said that you were over Cho? Because from what I've noticed, you two have been staring at each other for the entire night.. It's obvious you're still pretty much in love with your *best friend*." AJ told him knowingly.

Cedric didn't deny her assumption but instead, sighed in defeat, looking down at their shoes as they danced, a frown on his handsome features. "Was I *that* obvious?" He mumbled, causing AJ to laugh again, shaking her head in amusement at him.

"Pretty much, Cedric... I could tell from the minute the night started... It's pretty hard not to notice when your date would much rather look at another girl while you dance together... And from the way you glare at that poor Beauxbatons boy, you pretty much confirmed my suspicions." She told him, smiling knowingly.

Cedric began to flush a deep red and mumbled something incoherent again, looking very embarrassed at being figured out. "I should have known I couldn't have put it past the second smartest student in your year." He kidded lightly.

AJ grinned again, quirking the edge of her lips into a half-smile soon afterwards when she caught his forlorn look once more.

"I'm sorry for being such a bad date, Amanda... I shouldn't have asked *you* when I knew all along that I wasn't over Cho... I feel like I've led you on. I'm such a jerk." He said dejectedly but AJ shook her head firmly, laughing.

"Cedric, what are you talking about? First of all, you asked me because I was your *friend* and believe me, that was a good enough reason for me to accept. Besides, don't worry about it. I knew the

entire time even before the ball anyway that you like Cho.” She told him, giggling.

Cedric looked at her in shock but a small smile was playing at the corner of his lips as he met her teasing gaze, causing him to roll his eyes in mock annoyance.

“Besides, I already told you earlier *pretty-boy*, I only had a small, *teensy* crush on you before but it’s gone now. Frankly, to be honest, you’re not my type.” She told him playfully, winking as Cedric returned it with a good-natured laugh.

“Well, I do admit that was a harsh rejection, I’ll learn to move on and forget about the heartbreak Potter.” He kidded, winking back as AJ swatted his arm, laughing.

“Don’t push it, Diggory.” She threatened in a mock growl, causing Cedric to roll his eyes but grin back with a teasing hint in his eyes as well.

“I happen to know I’m not your type because you happen to have a liking to a certain *blonde, conceited Slytherin ‘jerk’*, I might mention.” He teased, causing AJ to blush immediately and to gape at him in surprise.

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about! I d-don’t even know where you got that idea so drop it Diggory before I whack you one.” She growled, causing Cedric to smirk at her.

“So... May I ask, why didn’t you ask Cho anyway?” AJ asked suddenly, giving Cedric a curious look.

Cedric sighed, his face immediately sobering as he looked back at where Cho was dancing across the room, looking very pretty indeed in a gown of navy blue.

“She kept talking about how handsome that new guy friend of hers from Beauxbatons was so I decided it was better off to leave her alone. She thinks of nothing more of me than a friend anyway.” He told her.

AJ snorted in disbelief, immediately drawing Cedric's attention back to the younger girl in annoyance. "What?"

"Cedric, Cho's been glaring at me in threat the moment we walked into the Hall. Now tell me *that* means she doesn't like you the same way. She's obviously jealous. I can tell... She's just in denial—trust me." AJ told him confidently.

Cedric's face seemed to light up in response, a genuine smile finally breaking out into his handsome face. "You really think so, Amanda?" He asked, his eyes glowing with hope and happiness.

AJ smirked at his face but nodded, giving the Hufflepuff boy a knowing but teasing smile.

"However...The fact that you're both in hopelessly in love with each other is not enough for me to forgive you about the fact that you *used* me, Cedric Diggory." She kidded in mock indignation, pretending to scowl at him as Cedric winced but laughed in response.

"Well how would you know that, she—hey!" Cedric cut off his own sentence in a protest when AJ hastily began steering him around herself towards the other couple, a mischievous glint in her eye. Once they had reached the pair, she ignored Cho's horrified look at her and let go of Cedric at once, cutting in between the other couple and giving the Beauxbatons boy a bright, flirtatious smile.

"Excuse me but do you mind if I cut in?" She asked, turning back to look as Cho shook her head dumbly, her jaw hanging open as AJ smiled charmingly in response, taking the Beauxbatons boy's hand and leading him away from the couple.

"I'm AJ Potter.... You are?" She asked the boy curiously, finally seeing the bewildered look he was shooting her as she was the one who steered him on the dance floor away from Cedric and Cho.

The boy looked dumbstruck for a moment, flicking his eyes up to see the crescent-moon scar on her forehead before he answered, giving her a nervous smile. "Call me Anton, AJ. Simply charmed to meet such a beautiful girl such as yourself." He added in a deep French accent, giving her hand which he held in his own a kiss.

AJ rolled her eyes to herself and turned to look back over her shoulder, smiling tenderly at the scene as she finally saw Cedric bow down to Cho and kiss her hand, offering his arm for a dance.

Cho smiled back nervously, blushing as she slipped her hand through his and allowed him to pull her into his arms, the couple swaying very slowly despite the upbeat music, melting into each other's arms.

Within a couple of moments, Cho had rested her head on Cedric's shoulder and he was holding her tenderly, stroking her hair with a soft smile on his face as they swayed very softly on the dance floor. When AJ had caught Cedric's eye, he gave her a small smile of thanks which she returned warmly, shaking her head before she turned her attention back to her partner.

"Excuse me?" A familiar male voice had said as a hand tapped Anton lightly on the shoulder, causing him to whirl around and see Blaise standing there, smiling at AJ.

"May I cut in?" He asked, looking at Anton with a small warning look in his eye which dared the other boy to say no, causing Anton to nod instantly, releasing AJ and moving to find another partner.

AJ smiled at her best friend as he took her into his arms and they began waltzing to the music, obviously relieved to be dancing with someone she knew.

"I saw that Ms. Hopeless romantic... You set Diggory up with Cho Chang on purpose didn't you?" Blaise asked, smirking fondly at her as he briefly twirled her around, shaking his head.

AJ laughed and shrugged, her eyes sparkling with laughter and delight. "What can I say? I'm a sucker for romance... Cedric was practically asking me to do it... I just gave him a push in the right direction." She told him, winking.

Blaise laughed in response, rolling his eyes at her playful tone of voice and giving her a wink in return as well. "You never cease to amaze me, Potter... It's almost hard to accept the fact that you're a Slytherin at all at times. And it's hard to believe you're even related to



Harry if you didn't look alike... You're the complete opposite of him." He mused.

AJ rolled her eyes, giggling at the implied insult to her twin brother. "Tell me something I don't know... Harry's a git but you know I love him." She said, looking fondly over to where her brother was talking to Draco.

Blaise nodded before grinning again and taking in her whole attire, pretending to check her out. "Hmm... You're looking gorgeous tonight, Potter. I never thought there was actually some beauty hidden underneath all the beast in you." He teased, causing AJ to growl and punch him on the shoulder.

"Watch your mouth, Prince charming before I turn you into the big ugly toad! How did you know about that muggle fairytale anyway?" She suddenly asked, raising an eyebrow as her best friend blushed in response.

"Ah... Well, Hannah forced me to read 'Beauty and the Beast' one time and well... I couldn't seem to forget the plot... Pretty clichéd story though if you ask me." He explained, rolling his eyes.

AJ nodded but not without giving him a teasing smile, her eyes twinkling knowingly at him. "I see... So.. You and *Hannah* huh? I would never have guessed, Blaise... I would *never* have guessed." She said, causing him to blush darker.

"You don't accept us either?" He asked sadly, giving her a disappointed look but AJ shook her head firmly, squeezing his hand.

"I didn't say *that*, I just said that it was quite a shock at first... It came completely out of nowhere and I never thought childish girls were your type. You always seemed to go for those flashy types... Mostly Ravenclaws too... But a *Hufflepuff*?" She asked, raising an eyebrow.

Blaise winced, giving her a rather sheepish smile in response. "Well... Neither did I... It just...*happened*, that's all... Started out as a pretty pointless fling at first and we kept trying to deny our feelings but eventually... We both fell... It was completely unexpected but... *I love her*." He told her.

AJ smiled at him, her eyes shining in both surprise and warmth at the tone of his voice. "Well... I think it's sweet, Blaise... Despite your hatred for Hufflepuffs, how ironic for you to fall for one yourself... Guess there really is such a thing called karma huh?" She teased, giggling when Blaise growled at her.

"Watch yourself, Potter... Watch yourself... You may be my best friend but that doesn't mean I won't hex you into oblivion when I want to." He threatened darkly.

AJ just smirked at him, raising an eyebrow in amusement. "You wouldn't dare... You know I can easily counter it with a hex of my own *Blaisee-pooh!*" She said in a baby voice, pinching his cheek teasingly.

Blaise scowled darker and sneered at her in annoyance, causing her to laugh again, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I admit that at first, I was just as pissed off as Harry and Draco were about the whole incident, I can accept her for you. You're my best friend after all... So I'll be civil to Hannah for you... *But...* Don't expect me to become a Hufflepuff lover overnight. I'll only be... *nice to her.*" AJ told him, wincing in hesitation.

Blaise grinned, waving the thought away in amusement.

"Don't worry about it... Most of the time she doesn't even act like a Hufflepuff at all but just so you know, I still hate Hufflepuffs too. Just because I'm going out with one doesn't mean I have to be nice to her friends." He added, breaking out into the mischievous Slytherin sneer.

AJ laughed at the evil tone in his voice, amazed at his defiance to change despite having finally fallen in love for real this time. "So... Finally whipped at last... I never thought the day would come, Zabini." AJ told him, grinning slyly at him.

Blaise returned it with a lopsided smile, shrugging in response. "Hey, neither did I but you never can tell anymore anyway..." He answered easily.

AJ nodded before she sighed and turned to look back at where Ron was dancing nearby with Lavender but seeing the glare he was sending her, she snapped her head away and met Blaise's concerned look.

"So... How have *you* been lately, AJ? I know we haven't been spending a lot of time together recently with all our individual problems and all but... Have you sorted out your feelings yet?" He asked, looking intently at her.

AJ sighed again but nodded in response, giving him a wry grin but somehow, as always, Blaise knew that it was forced as he merely raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well?" He pressed gently, squeezing her arm in a comforting manner, causing AJ to slowly raise her head and meet his gaze reluctantly, her eyes glistening.

"I... I like Ron, Blaise... I really do... I wasn't lying to myself when I had a crush on him for three years... He seems like the kind of guy I wanted for a long time now..." She started, biting her lip and looking down.

Blaise nodded but quirked the corner of his lips into a sideways smile, already knowing what was about to come next.

"But?"

AJ snapped her head up in surprise again, her eyes widening for a brief moment before she turned to look at Draco, who gave her a small forced smile before looking away.

"I guess I...I *love* Draco... It's a completely different, much more *intense* feeling than with how I feel about Ron... I've loved him for a long time now... I guess... Ever since I first saw him I felt some sort of strange feeling towards him but... it was only now that I finally realized what that feeling actually was." She explained, her eyes glazing over.

Blaise allowed his half-smile to bloom into a full blown one, looking amused and relieved at the same time. "Took you long enough,

Potter.” He said sarcastically, causing AJ to gape at him in surprise, her face flushing in embarrassment.

“Excuse me?” She demanded in irritation, narrowing her eyes at him as Blaise sniggered, giving her a knowing smile.

“I’ve known all along how you felt about Malfoy... It was pretty obvious in the way you two liked to argue and contradict each other in our younger years... Hell, I even fancied you myself back during our first year for a short while but it disappeared when I realized that Malfoy had a thing for you so...I settled for being your best friend.” He told her, causing AJ to gape at him in surprise.

“Yeah, hard to believe, I know but then I realized you never really were my type much anyway, AJ... Frankly, I was never really fond of smart, independent women. I liked submissive girls better and seeing how Draco had such a hard time with you, I’m glad too.” He teased, causing AJ to flush and punch him again.

Laughing, Blaise gave her a sheepish smile when he caught sight of the indignant scowl on her face, shaking his head in amusement.

“I was kidding, AJ! I just meant the way you always went out of your way to go against everything Draco said and how you always loved to prove him wrong.. It was *obvious*. I’m just surprised you never realized how you felt for him until now.” He told her, smirking.

AJ flushed darker, if possible and muttered something unrecognizable under her breath in response, glaring at her shoes as they danced.

“It was amusing to find out that Draco liked you as well... Being the snobbish jerk he is, I always thought he’d go for girls like Pansy or Lila... You know, the vain, shallow types... Seems I underestimated him at some point... He likes a girl with a good head on her shoulders.” He told her, whacking AJ’s head playfully, causing her to growl at him.

“Looks like you had me figured out even before I did...” She mumbled darkly, cursing under her breath.

“Pretty much... But I just thought I’d let *you* figure your own feelings out for yourself before I explained them to you. That way, the decision would be all *yours* and not mine.” He told her, causing AJ to look up and smile at him affectionately.

“Thanks Blaise... I don’t know what I’d do without you... You seem to be the best one I can always turn to for advice on stuff like this. Especially now I guess since you’ve become a sensitive bloke after falling in love.” She said, grinning as Blaise frowned at her.

“Bitch...” He muttered, causing AJ to change her grin into a smirk of amusement at him. “So... You think I should tell him how I feel Blaise?” She asked quietly, turning unsure and uncertain emerald-green eyes towards him.

Blaise didn’t answer for a moment, looking deep in thought before he finally met her gaze, a small smile on his face. “You know an important lesson I realized when I fell for Hannah, AJ?” He asked, looking at her with a grim expression.

AJ shook her head, fusing her eyebrows together as Blaise squeezed her hand again, giving her a reassuring smile.

“It’s the fact that most of the time... Especially in your case, you should go for the one that chases *you*... Not the one *you* chase after. Because the one person that can make you really happy... The one person who can really say he loves you... Is the one who waits patiently behind you for you to love him back...” He said in a slow voice.

AJ’s eyes glazed over in tears at hearing his words, snapping her head away to look intently at the floor as the tears threatened to spill over. Blaise saw this but kept silent, not wanting to say anything to embarrass her but wiping her eyes hastily; she managed a weak laugh and turned her head up to look at him, managing a teary smirk.

“Since when did you become such a sentimental, lovesick romantic, Blaise?” She teased, laughing weakly but Blaise kept his facial expression grim, his eyes blank and intense.

“Think about it, AJ.” Was all he said and soon after, he gave her a last smile, bowing down to her and kissing her hand again before sauntering back to Hannah to claim her for the next dance.

**A/N:** To AW!! Poor Harrykins!! I hope you're all not mad at him anymore... I think I've already made him suffer so much for his actions in this chapter... pout So no more whacking Harry okay? Hermione is making him squirm in jealousy! I know, he deserves to suffer but still! A Slytherin can only take so much... **PLEASE REVIEW!! PLEASE??** (D/A and H/Hr coming up in the next chapter! )

## Chapter 23- A Dance to Remember

AJ watched Blaise walk back to Hannah silently, her eyes blank and unreadable as she saw the happy glow on Hannah's face, finally realizing for the first time in her life that she actually wanted to experience that feeling...

It all suddenly clicked like a bulb suddenly lighting up in her head and everything she had been feeling suddenly became clear to her and she could understand perfectly... She actually wanted to be that happy... That content with the boy she really loved... She couldn't believe how stupid she had been acting these past few weeks... She had been running away with the one thing that could have made her feel just that... Now she knew it...

*Draco...* She thought, a beautiful smile lighting up her face as she turned to look at him, seeing him laughing loudly with some of the Slytherins in the upper years.

*He* could make her happy... It had been him all along... She was just too dense to realize it... She didn't even understand what she had been afraid of... Why she kept trying to deny what she felt for him and why she kept running away...

And it seemed as though everything they had been through from first year began running through her head... How they had loved to annoy each other... How Draco seemed to be the only one to make her feel so pissed off yet so charmed at the same time...

How warm and safe she felt in his arms... How he could make her blush with just a single well-chosen sentence or yet how much she could piss her off in the same way as well... How he made her laugh the way no one else did... Even when she was crying. But most of all... How with him... She...

*I don't know... I just feel so happy... So alive...* She thought, finally allowing a big smile to grace her face, looking much more energized and alive than she had the whole year.

And *that* explained why his silver eyes were so beautiful to him than anyone else's... How somehow, she had thought of *them* when she

had been kissing Ron... That also explained why her skin tingled every time he touched her and why his kisses seemed to affect her so much...

She couldn't believe she hadn't realized it before... If only she had known this sooner, it would have prevented this whole problem altogether.. It was all finally coming together... Coming to her all at once...No wonder there were times when Harry would glare at Draco or Blaise would smile teasingly at the two of them..

Blaise had just summed it all up for her but the answer had been under her nose all along... *I understand now... I understand everything now and Merlin's beard, it feels damn good!* She thought, laughing at herself.

*No wonder I've been acting like a lovesick idiot...*She thought, smirking. *Because I am... I 'am' a lovesick idiot... because...*"I love Draco..." She said out loud to herself finally, now instead of hiding it, smiling at the perfectly true statement just as Blaise and Hannah passed her, Blaise finally sighing to relief when he heard her words and smiling to himself.

*As much as I'm pissed at Malfoy right now... Well... Even a jerk like him deserves to find the right girl.* He thought before smiling back at Hannah, grinning at his accomplishment.

"You're such a romantic..." The girl teased, causing Blaise to blush in response before he joined her laughter, shaking his head as he began steering them off towards the corner of the dance floor.

"I'm in love with Draco..." AJ repeated to herself, laughing again as she realized how stupid she must look in the middle of all those dancing couples thinking and talking to herself.

Laughing happily, she grinned and headed off towards the handsome Slytherin when she felt a hand suddenly grab her from behind, whirling her around to face her twin, who was smirking in amusement at her.

"I know that..." Harry drawled in concealed laughter at how funny his twin had looked but at the moment, AJ couldn't care less how stupid



she had looked, intent on finding Draco and giving him a passionate kiss.

“Well I know you know...” AJ retorted sarcastically, the smile never leaving her face as she faced him, both of them still on the dance floor.

“And you look stupid right now with that big stupid grin on your face for no reason, did *you* know *that*, AJ?” Harry asked sarcastically, snorting in amusement when AJ just shrugged, smiling wider.

“More or less, the thought crossed my mind Harry...But I couldn't really care...I'm a lovesick fool.” She answered, laughing at the sickened expression on her brother's face.

Harry just winced and shook his head before he quirked his lips into a grin and bowed down to her, offering his hand. “May I have this dance?” He asked, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

AJ raised an eyebrow in suspicion but nodded and let her twin steer her around the dance floor wildly, obviously not intent on dancing but intent on bringing her somewhere.

“Harry, what on earth you up to?” AJ asked in annoyance as Harry spun her around in wild, dizzy circles, laughing at the annoyed look on her face.

“Allow me, AJ... I owe it to both you and Draco after everything...” He said before he spun her around again, ignoring the bewildered look on her face as he steered her over to where Draco was watching them from their table, a sad smile on his face.

“Harry, allow you to what?! What the bloody hell are you—” AJ's words died on her lips as Harry let her go and shoved her towards Draco, who looked at Harry with shock evident in his eyes as though Harry had turned into a flobberworm.

“How about that dance you said AJ promised you, Draco? I think you both could do with it now.” Harry said softly, giving him a small smile which Draco returned with a wide-eyed look, blinking in surprise.

“Harry?” He asked, his voice cracking in surprise as Harry rolled his eyes and grinned at him, dragging him off the table and shoving him towards AJ, who smiled at him, her eyes sparkling beautifully.

Draco felt his face flush for a moment, looking back at Harry who gave him a weak smirk, raising an eyebrow and causing Draco to nearly trip over his own feet in shock.

“Who are you and what have you done to my best friend?” He croaked out but Harry just laughed it off, scaring Draco even more when he waved them away but just as AJ had slipped her arm through Draco’s, he called after him again.

“Hey Malfoy!” He said, causing Draco to look back at him in nervous anticipation, half-expecting Harry to pull him away from AJ again and take back what he had said but to his surprise and unflattering disbelief, Harry gave him a smile.

“Happy Christmas... This is the other present I promised you... My approval. Take care of her, Malfoy. Keep her happy.” He said, smiling but Draco sensed a hint of sadness in his eyes as he clapped him on the shoulder lightly before turning to walk away.

AJ instantly shot towards him, yanking her brother into a tight hug and burying her face into his chest to hide the sudden flow of tears at hearing his words. Harry froze, surprised but smiled gently and stroked her hair as AJ sniffed against him, looking up and giving him a smile.

“I love you, Harry...” She murmured softly, sniffing before she laughed and pulled away, hastily dabbing at her eyes. Harry squeezed her hand in response, holding back his own tears as he spoke in a shaky voice. “I love you too...I *a/ways* will.” He responded, raising a hand to stroke her cheek for a brief moment.

Then, with a smile, he gave Draco one last nod before walking off, leaving the couple staring after him with reflective looks on their faces.

Draco watched him go for a minute with a small, touched smile, surprised at himself as he felt incredibly moved at his best friend’s acceptance.

*Better than the Firebolt, that's for sure...The jerk has a heart after all...* Draco couldn't help thinking, watching Harry's retreating back and suddenly feeling a strange sense of pride for the great best friend in Harry that no one else knew about...

But somehow, he couldn't help but feel sad at the same time because though he had finally gotten Harry's consent on AJ... Well... After what he had seen in her diary that morning... He knew that it wasn't his place to take care of AJ... It wasn't his place to be the one to make her happy.

She didn't want *him*... She wanted Weasley... And as much as he loved her and wanted to seize the opportunity... He couldn't be selfish when it came to her... He loved her too much for that...

"Well, Malfoy? Are you just going to stand there with your ugly face all twisted up like that or are you going to ask me to dance?" AJ asked, giving him a smile as she took his hand and pulled him towards the dance floor, her smile widening when her skin tingled at the touch again.

"Who are you calling ugly, Potter? Have you tried looking at a mirror lately yourself?" He responded weakly, giving the girl a mock scowl which AJ returned with a grin, her eyes sparkling lightly with a light sense of humor.

Draco managed a weak laugh as the lights began to dim around them and the Weird sisters began playing a slow, romantic song in which all the couples began melting into each other again one by one, swaying softly to the slow beat.

To Draco's relief, the lights had dimmed enough to hide the dancing couple's faces as he finally wrapped his arm around AJ's slender waist and pulled her close, pressing their bodies tight together and taking her other hand in his.

AJ rested her other hand on around the crook of his neck and closed her eyes, resting her head on his shoulder and snuggling into him, burying her face into his neck.

Draco smiled and pulled her closer, burying his own face into her neck and closing his eyes, feeling more content than he had ever felt in his life just to be dancing there with the girl he loved in his arms... Even if she didn't feel the same about him...

The minute he had seen her that night... He couldn't look at any other girl in the room except for her... She was... Beautiful... Just so beautiful... And it had hurt to think that she would never be his...

That was why he couldn't hold her gaze for more than a couple of seconds that night... See... He had vowed to himself that afternoon when he had been crying that he would.. *For once in his life...* Do the right thing...

He had never done anything redeeming in his life very much but at least he could say that he had given up the girl he loved for her own happiness... It had taken a lot of sacrifice on his part... He had never even been taught to give or to share as a child but...

He just didn't want to be selfish enough to keep her to himself when she wanted someone else or someone else could make her happy... Yes... As much as he hated to admit it or how much the idea made him sick to his stomach...

All those times of breaking those other girls' hearts had finally come back to haunt him... He's finally learned to love someone who didn't love him in return... And now that he was experiencing it... He definitely knew one thing... *It hurt...Like hell...*

And every single time that night when he saw AJ's beautiful face, that sudden selfish urge inside him kept rushing out, tempting him to just think of himself and get AJ but he had kept forcing it down by looking away...

It kept coming back though... Coming back every time AJ smiled at him... He wanted her to be his so badly... Even now, more than ever as he was actually holding her... Dancing with her and feeling her delicate body pressed against his own...

The strong force was coming back now but he would let it take control of him... He needed to do this... Now before he lost the remaining

strength he had left and took her for his own... He knew he wouldn't have the strength anymore if he didn't take this chance.

As the song continued playing very softly in the background and the couples around them started to lean into each other for a kiss, Draco felt another painful stinging in his eyes, trying desperately to hold them back.

Biting his lip, he tightened his now trembling arms around her again, untangling AJ's hand from his own and placing it on his other shoulder before he placed his own hand on the other side of her waist.

He closed his eyes again, allowing a single tear to slip down his cheek in the darkness as AJ gently caressed his neck with both her hands, snuggling into his neck and pressing her lips briefly against the pulse point.

His breathing hitched at the tender action as she smiled into his neck and closed her eyes again, allowing herself to melt into his arms just as Draco managed a shaky smile as well, pressing his lips softly onto her neck the same way as AJ seemed to tremble in response.

A tear slipped down his cheek onto the floor but AJ didn't seem to notice, a happy smile on her face as she pressed herself closer onto him, not even seeing the other couples in the dark anymore as though she and Draco were the only ones in the room, dancing to themselves.

Nothing else mattered except the boy that held her in his arms and for that very special moment, they were the only ones in there, caught up in their own magical world just as the other couples around them.

Finally, Draco bit his lip and let the tears fill his eyes up naturally now, thankful for the darkness of the room as he knew there must be a look of utter anguish and sadness on his features right now.

"Draco... There's something I've been meaning to tell you..." AJ finally murmured, kissing his neck again as she caressed him again to get his attention, Draco not seeing the smile on her face.

Feeling his heart drop painfully to the floor, Draco braced himself for what was coming, his hands clenching into shaky fists instantly.

"You don't have to tell me anything, AJ... I already know what you're going to tell me..." Draco said, his voice cracking, causing AJ to attempt pulling back but Draco refused to let her go.

"No, please, don't make this any harder for me as it already is." Draco said, his voice quavering but he tried his best to hold it back, taking a deep shaky breath.

"Y-you know?! H-how d-do you know?" She asked in surprise, her eyes widening but she could feel Draco shaking his head firmly, tightening his arms around her waist.

"That's not important right now... What's important right now is you don't have to explain anything to me at all..." He told her, feeling as if this was the hardest thing he ever had to do in his life.

"I—I don't?"

"No... You don't... I... I *understand*...I understand now, AJ... I know why you've been acting the way you've been..." He said, forcing the words out with the strength he had left.

"Y-you do? How? But why do you, how can you possibly—" AJ didn't get to finish his sentence when Draco squeezed her tightly to him, interrupting her words.

"Shh... Please... Let me finish first AJ..." He pleaded, biting his lip as AJ nodded, though reluctantly, looking confused and bewildered all at the same time.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry for being so stubborn and selfish these last couple of days... I've been thinking about myself again... I've been such a jerk... I didn't stop to think about what *you* would feel..." He admitted, sighing.

*What on earth is Draco talking about?* AJ thought as she felt him hold her tightly as though he was afraid she was going to disappear if he let her go.

"I've been assuming things about you... I never considered you would actually feel that way... All this time, I thought you felt something towards *me* but I guess I was wrong. I'm sorry if I forced you or confused you into anything... I never wanted to force you to like me..." Draco said and at his words, AJ's eyes widened in panic as she hastily tried to answer.

"But Draco, you don't understand! I have—"

"Oh but I understand perfectly now, AJ... More than ever before... And I just want you to know that... It's...It's *okay* with me... I can handle it... I... I can accept it... It hurts like hell but hey... Been through much worse before..." Draco lied, his voice hoarse as he let out a forced laugh.

"Draco, wait, you don't get it, If you think I still like Ron—"

Draco flinched at the name but he swallowed the pain, shaking his head furiously at his own weakness.

"Don't bother covering it up, AJ... I know you like Weasley... And... I'm not the type of guy to force myself onto someone whom I know doesn't love me all my life..." He said, laughing bitterly.

"Draco, *please*, I—"

"If Weasley hurts you however, you just tell me but I can't promise I won't kill him... I love you too much to take away your happiness... Though it will hurt *me* to let you go like this... I'd rather have myself hurt than to ever hurt you...Because... AJ..." Draco's voice trailed off as he pulled away and tilted AJ's chin up gently to meet his gaze, finally allowing AJ to see the continuous tears rolling down his face.

At the sight of them, AJ felt her chest squeeze painfully at the thought that Draco Malfoy... Draco was actually crying... He was actually crying in front of her for the first time... And what hurt the most was the fact that he was crying because of... Because of *her*...

*Oh my god... I actually hurt him already even before I had the chance to... How stupid have I been?!* AJ thought in horror, her heart wrenching painfully.

Draco absolutely never cried, especially in front of another... Being a Malfoy had taught him to consider crying as weakness and defeat but at the moment, he didn't seem to care as he raised a trembling hand and gently caressed her cheek.

"I love you...AJ..." He whispered as his beautiful eyes filled with tears again as he carefully pushed back the single curled lock of hair that fell onto her face to gaze at her intently.

AJ opened her mouth to respond but before she could say anything, Draco pressed his lips to hers firmly, not giving her a chance to react as he poured out his entire self in that single kiss alone.

Now tightening his arms around her, he began kissing her as though he thought he would never get the chance to ever kiss her again, savoring the very moment of having her in his arms, even for just that dance alone and being able to kiss her as his own for that night.

The kiss deepened and began to grow more passionate, their lips caressing each other's as though they had a mind of their own and were clearly unwilling to separate from the other, the kiss fueled not by desire but instead, fueled with the love reflected from each.

Then, as though it had been painful to do so, Draco forced his own body to yank himself away from the kiss, giving AJ one last kiss on the cheek before he bowed down weakly, giving her hand a kiss as well.

"Thank you for the dance, Potter..." He whispered before he turned around and stalked off, feeling the hot bitter tears still streaming down but he wiped them away angrily, disgusted at himself for crying so openly.

AJ watched him walk away from her, tears falling down her own eyes as she walked the only boy she loved walk farther and farther away from her until she finally had the mind to go after him, silently begging him to come back.

*He loves me... He actually loves me!! I can't believe it.. All this time, he's loved me and I love him and I just let that slip through my fingers! I was too damn blind, dammit! I can't believe I never realized*



*the one guy who could actually make me happy was the one right beside me all along...* She thought, angry at herself as she hurried after him, making her way through the crowd on the dance floor.

*I just had to go looking out the fucking window... Draco.. Please come back! Come back, please, I love you too! I always have, please!* She begged silently as she furiously pushed through the crowd of dancers, seeing Draco walk further away, obviously heading outside.

She stopped when Draco reached the door to the balcony, exiting the room hastily, causing her to nearly break out into a run when she felt someone grab her from behind and pull her back. Turning around, she felt her heart drop as she squelched a groan, seeing Ron Weasley grinning behind her.

Now wiping her tears away hastily so he wouldn't see them, AJ gave him a slightly annoyed look, trying to break free from his grasp. "Weasley...*Ron*, look, this isn't really a good time right now, I'm heading outside to go after—"

"Ah, come on Potter... Don't be like that... How about a dance? And may I say that despite how much my pride is trying to keep me from praising my enemy, I have to admit that you look gorgeous." Ron told her, grinning.

AJ looked back at where Draco had last been, wanting to tear herself away from her former crush and tear after him but Ron soon led her to the dance floor again, immediately pulling her close to him.

"I've watched you all night, AJ... I was shocked that you went with Diggory since I heard Slytherins don't usually date Hufflepuffs but hey... I never thought I'd be dancing with *you* right now." He said, chuckling.

AJ didn't respond, dancing very stiffly in his arms and for the first time in her life, that she had felt nothing more for Ron except a childish admiration... Now, seeing him up close, even in the darkness, it gave her a chance to see him for the first time.

Maybe it had been the whole being enemies thing that had intrigued her... She thought that falling for her brother's enemy was rather wild and unexpected and most of all, romantic...

She thought she liked Ron because... Well.. He was the good guy.. He was the brave, noble and loyal Gryffindor while Draco was the nasty, heartless, conniving Slytherin, not in the least bit loyal at all but now he was looking up at his face intently, she found herself wishing it was Draco who was holding her in his arms again.

That it was Draco smiling down at her... Draco's eyes sparkling at her with that special, mischievous, scheming twinkle that never failed to bring a smile to her face despite the trouble it usually caused soon after...

Draco holding her, caressing her cheek the way he always loved to do so... *Kissing* her again... his lips brushing against hers... His strong but gentle fingers intertwined with hers...

AJ sighed and looked intently at Ron again, forcing out a weak smile which seemed more like a sad grimace to her but Ron didn't seem to notice as the girl stared into his eyes sadly.

*They aren't silver... They aren't Draco's eyes... He isn't Draco...* She thought sadly, looking at the direction Draco had gone off again, her eyes clouding over.

*I've been going for the wrong choice all this time and when I did make the right one, he was the one who shoved me in the other direction because I was too damn late...* She thought angrily, cursing herself.

Looking intently in that direction, she couldn't help but think of the words Draco had spoken back to herself, feeling her heart jump painfully into her throat. *I love you... Draco...* She thought, her eyes filling with hot tears again but Ron had suddenly stopped dancing, staring at her in shock.

"What did you say?!" He asked, his voice cracking in what AJ hoped was shock or anger.

"Nothing?" AJ snapped, glaring at him in annoyance.

“No you said something... In fact, you said.. You said you loved me!” Ron exclaimed, a wide smile on his face.

AJ's teary eyes widened in panic in the darkness as she finally realized she had said the '*I love you*' part out loud, turning to look at Ron in shock and horror. “No I didn't! I—”

“Yes you did, I heard you! And don't worry, AJ, I'm not mad or anything, in fact, I really like you too! It's not as intense as love yet but I'm more than willing to let it develop.” Ron told her, beaming happily.

“Ron... Really, I didn't mean to say what I did out loud but actually, what I meant was—”

“Don't worry about it, AJ! I understand completely, you don't have to be embarrassed to admit your feelings! In fact, would you like to go out with me secretly sometime this week?” Ron interrupted her, flushing slightly but smiling.

AJ's jaw dropped wide open and her eyes bulged out in shock as she gaped openly in horror at the boy in front of her.

“Ron, no, I wasn't talking about—”

“Great!” Ron exclaimed, not at all listening to her as he burst out into another grin and his eyes twinkled excitedly.

“I knew you'd love the idea! I can hardly wait; we'll have a lot of fun, AJ so we can start to get to know each other a little better. We never did spend much time after the Astronomy tower but we can really talk this time.” He said, winking.

AJ couldn't believe what she was hearing from the Gryffindor's mouth as she just stared dumbly at him in absolute shock. *Argh! No, I'm doing it again! I'm making it worse! Stop him before it's too late!* She screamed silently at herself, looking up and giving Ron a forced smile.

“Ron, I would really love to but see—” AJ stopped abruptly when Ron pressed his lips to hers in brief kiss, cutting her off before he pulled away again, his eyes sparkling.

"I'll owl you about it once I set everything up." He told her, squeezing her hand tightly in his as AJ grimaced, her eyes searching frantically around the dark room.

She opened her mouth once again to turn him down and tell him no but when she managed to find her voice, she was surprised at what had instead come out of her mouth.

"Would you excuse me for a second? I have to go to the bathroom, I'm not feeling well..." She asked weakly, looking relieved when Ron let her go and nodded, walking back to his Gryffindor friends with a beam on his face as AJ rushed out of the dance floor, finally heading after Draco.

Now pushing past the dancers, AJ lifted her long skirt slightly enough for her to walk properly, her eyes filled with panic at the thought of losing Draco as she broke out into a run after him, her feet aching painfully in her dress shoes but she ignored the pain, running faster.

*I'll just tell him how I feel and get this whole thing sorted out right now...* She thought, racing for the door to the balcony and flinging it open, her eyes searching frantically for the handsome Slytherin.

However, she wasn't at all expecting the sight the greeted her and caused her heart to squeeze painfully in her chest, her eyes widening as she covered her mouth hastily with her hand to squelch the gasp that wanted to escape her.

There he was alright... Draco was there on the balcony but... He wasn't alone... His back was facing her so he obviously hadn't seen her yet but he was obviously very busy with the girl who had her arms wrapped around him, kissing him right then and there.

AJ couldn't make out the face of the girl yet but the girl had her arms linked around Draco's neck and the two seemed so preoccupied with each other that they hadn't even sensed her there, both of them not breaking the kiss.

AJ let out a small whimper of pain as she stepped back slightly, causing the girl Draco was kissing to open her eyes and look over

Draco's shoulder at the crying girl watching, her lips forming into smug smile.

*Padma Patil...* AJ thought, recognizing the girl for a brief moment before she turned and fled from back into the hall, desperately holding back the sobs that were dangerously about to spill out of her.

*I'm too late... I've lost him forever... He's moved on already... I've had my chance and I blew it big time... I should have known... Draco's not the type of guy who would wait forever...* She thought as she headed for the doors, wanting to leave the party as soon as possible.

*I deserve this misery... I deserve to suffer like this... But... I don't deserve his love... I guess I never did... I deserve all of this... All of it...* She thought, lifting her skirt up again to help her run faster and managing to bump into Cedric, who was with Cho, the new happy couple glowing with love.

"Amanda, are you okay?" Cedric asked in concern, seeing the tears in AJ's eyes but AJ shook her head firmly, managing a weak smile.

"Yeah... I'm okay... Uhm... Cho?" She asked, turning to the dark-haired girl on Cedric's arm, who responded by giving her a small smile.

"Yes AJ?" She asked, looking at her intently, noticing the anguished look on the other girl's face.

"Take care of Cedric okay? Always show him and remind him of how much you're grateful for his love because you'll never how much you love him until you lose him."

AJ gave them a teary smile, not giving the couple a chance to react before she stormed off, heading back to the Slytherin dungeons, her tears falling lifelessly down onto the floor.

Hearing the heavy footsteps behind him, Draco pulled back and shoved Padma away from him, giving her a dark glare before he whirled around wildly, looking around but he saw nobody there.

"Who was behind us?" He asked her sharply, narrowing his eyes at her but Padma just shrugged, casually examining her nails.

"No one, Draco... Just some Hufflepuff... She probably had a crush on you since she ran off so quickly, looking so disappointed." She answered in false sweetness, smiling secretly to herself.

Almost on impulse, Fierros began growling fiercely, struggling against the chain that bound the dragon pendant to Draco's neck, causing Draco to narrow his eyes in suspicion at her again.

"Don't you lie to me, Patil! Who the *fuck* saw you forcing yourself onto me?!" He snapped furiously, his swollen eyes flashing like lightning bolts. Padma looked at him darkly, not answering his question as she just rolled her eyes and sighed, wrapping an arm around his neck seductively again.

"Why are we even spending our time talking, Draco? Come on... I know you were jealous of that Beauxbatons boy earlier... Why don't I make up for leaving you?" She purred but Draco shoved her away rudely, dusting himself.

"You said that if I let you kiss me *once*, you would leave me alone. Well, you didn't exactly say you were planning on *devouring* me but frankly, you're a lousy kisser Patil so leave me alone. I already gave you what you wanted, don't ever come near me ever again." Draco drawled slowly, giving the girl a sneer.

"But Draco..." She whined, resting a hand on his shoulder but Draco flinched and pulled himself away, looking disgusted.

"I said get the *fuck* away from me! *Sod off, Patil!*" He exploded, losing all his self-control as he shoved her away, turning his back to her and looking back up at the stars.

Padma seemed to get the hint as she finally let out one final growl and flipped her hair over her shoulder before stalking away, not turning back as she smirked smugly over her shoulder at him.

"Well, at least the damage to you, *Drakkie*, has already been caused... I'm happy at least that I have *one* reason to gloat about

leaving you.” She said haughtily, causing Fierros to growl at her again and Draco to whip his head around to face her once more, looking suspicious.

“Just what the bloody hell do you mean by that, Patil?” He asked, feeling a cold feeling of dread and nervousness rise inside him but he hid it with a sneer of hostility, glaring at her.

Padma just chuckled, looking very pleased with herself as she whirled around again, speaking to him over her shoulder.

“*No one* dumps a Patil without suffering immensely himself because of the consequences... Not you, Malfoy and certainly not your best friend Potter as well. One who dares to dump a Patil suffers for it. Harry’s just lucky my sister *likes* him... Which is something I can’t say the same about *you*, Malfoy. Happy Christmas.” She finished, giving him one last smile before walking back inside towards the Beauxbatons students.

Draco just watched her, his eyes widening at her words, feeling anger and panic rise up once again inside him as he looked down to see Fierros still growling after Parvati, struggling with his chain.

*You ‘know’ something Fierros... What did she mean by that?* He asked the dragon silently but Fierros just stared back up at him blankly, causing Draco to worry even more, clutching the pendant tightly in his hand.

“Herm-own-ninny, haff I told you that you look absolutely beautiful tonight?” Viktor asked as he and Hermione danced for the seventh time that night, Hermione’s feet already aching in pain.

Hermione tried very hard not to groan in annoyance as she forced another smile on her face, nodding at the Durmstrang boy. “Yes, Viktor... You’ve told me five times already.” She said in what she hoped sounded like a playful tone, getting irritated by the boy’s total adoration for her.

She had to admit of course that it had been very comforting and flattering how Viktor seemed to like her so much and how much he

showered her with compliments but after some time, it started to get annoying.

Sure she did love hearing from a guy how pretty she looked or how much he liked her but there was only a certain limitation to how much praise she could actually take.

She actually preferred a guy whom she could talk to with a decent conversation rather than spend the whole night adoring each other relentlessly.

Hermione had to admit that it was flattering when she had first walked into the Great Hall and most of the guys had stared at her in awe and admiration, some of them included Ron and Seamus themselves, and of course... *Harry...*

She wasn't stupid... She had seen how Harry had been staring at her the entire night and though at first it gave her a good feeling that she was actually hurting him as well... Later on... She couldn't bear it anymore.

Just seeing him with Parvati... Seeing the way the other girl's arms wrapped themselves around his neck or seeing how the other girl glowed beside him... It made her stomach twist over and over again.

Harry, well, as usual, looked incredible in a tux and for that brief moment, she could certainly see why in the past, he always had some new girl hanging off his arm... They weren't that stupid from an aesthetic point of view...

Judging from the way Harry had been sending death glares to Viktor the entire night, Hermione finally figured it out—Harry was *jealous*. He was actually jealous of Viktor Krum all along... All this time, Hermione had believed him when he said that he wasn't jealous because of her but she could see it in his eyes... He was *jealous* that she was with Viktor...

*Now if only he could lower his pride enough to realize it and actually take the blame for everything he's been causing me lately...* Hermione thought bitterly.



*Eragh! No! No, don't think about him! He doesn't even love you for crying out loud! He's probably just mad at Viktor because he hasn't gotten what he wanted from me yet!* A voice inside Hermione screamed at her, causing her to blink.

*He'll never change... He's a jerk and he will always be one... I don't want to get hurt again... I just thought I could change him... I thought I could change the 'great' Harry Potter somehow... I guess he proved me wrong.* Hermione reasoned with herself, sighing.

*But... As much as he hurt me... I still love him...* She realized, biting her lip and looking away from Viktor sadly, not wanting him to see her face.

Viktor didn't seem to notice her change of mood, chatting on happily about the upcoming summer and about how different Durmstrang is from Hogwarts, something they had been talking about since the night started.

Hermione forced a smile onto her face and nodded at his words, pretending to be listening intently as she scanned the dark room, catching site of the few other dancers around them.

Her eyes widened in surprise for a minute when she caught sight of couple that looked suspiciously like Malfoy and AJ but it was too dark for her to be sure of their faces since both seemed to have their faces buried in each other's necks.

*Since when was Malfoy ever one to be dancing with 'anyone' during a slow song?* She thought but she shook the thought away, shaking her head ruefully before she looked around again, looking for any sign of Ron or Seamus but the room was too dark that she couldn't make out anyone else on the dance floor anymore.

Ron had pissed her off, to say the least just fifteen minutes ago when she had joined them in their table for a short talk that night.

For some reason, he seemed to think that Hermione going with Viktor was like 'fraternizing with the enemy' and he had seemed incredibly pissed she had accepted to go with a Durmstrang student.

Hermione had been infuriated, to put it mildly that Ron thought he had the power to tell her who she can and cannot date she had reacted by slapping him hard on the cheek and storming off, leaving Ron staring after her in shock.

Frankly, Hermione hated being told what she should or shouldn't do because she believed herself to be smart enough to make her own decisions. She would never allow anyone else to tell her otherwise, because she was independent and proud of it.

But she couldn't help thinking however, that if Ron had reacted that way about her seeing Viktor, how was he going to react when he found out that she had gone out with Harry Potter? The very idea was enough to make her wince in anxiety.

One thing puzzled her that night however and that was the fact that Parvati had seemed to be glaring at her from the moment she had walked in the room...

*Why on earth would she be glaring at me like that? She should be looking all smug and triumphant.. After all... She got what she was planning all along anyway... She thought angrily.*

*Maybe I should just forget about it all and enjoy the rest of the night... I've ruined my mood enough with all this thinking anyway.* She finally thought, looking back up to meet Viktor's puzzled gaze at her.

"Herm-own-ninny, are you okay?" He asked, fusing his thick eyebrows together in question at her.

Hermione blinked again, looking dazed and gave him a sheepish smile, nodding hastily in reply. "Yeah, Viktor, I'm fine... Is something wrong? Am I being a bad date or something?" She asked lightly, earning a light laugh from the Bulgarian boy.

"No, it is not that... I haff just noticed you vir not listening to vat I haff bin saying..." He said, causing Hermione to feel a strong twinge of guilt.

"Oh... Sorry... I uh.. I was just thinking about something... What were you saying anyway?" She asked, this time giving him a light smile.

“Vell... I vos just asking if you vir enjoying yourself tonight or if you vir haffing a good time.” Viktor said, offering a shy smile.

“Of course, Viktor.... I’m having a great time. I’ve just been a little preoccupied with some problems lately but it has nothing to do with you.” She assured him, giving him a small smile.

Viktor visibly relaxed, smiling back before he spun her around in a graceful turn, causing her white skirt to swirl lightly in the process just a few notes before the slow song ended and Viktor bowed down to her, kissing her hand.

“Such a vonderful pleasure to dance with you, Herm-own-ninny.” He said, causing Hermione to bite back an amused smile at the pronunciation of her name.

“It’s a pleasure, Viktor. Why don’t we—” She was cut off when a guy tapped Krum on the shoulder, causing Hermione to look up and see a handsome blonde boy Hermione didn’t know giving her a smile.

“Excuse me, Monsieur, but would you mind if I ask your partner for a dance?” He asked in a deep French brogue, gesturing to Hermione with his hand.

Viktor looked as though he was about to decline the offer but Hermione spoke up for him, more than willing to dance with a different boy even just once.

“I would love to... You don’t mind, though, do you Viktor?” She asked, turning to him uncertainly but he nodded in agreement before walking back over to his Durmstrang buddies, Hermione losing his frame in the darkness of the room.

Hermione took the hand the boy offered her and allowed herself to be pulled into his arms in a dancing position and pretty soon, the boy was steering her around gracefully across the dance floor.

“My name is *Jacques*... What’s yours?” He asked, giving her another charming smile as Hermione shrugged and managed a weak one in return, her eyes blank.

“Call me Hermione. Are you a student from Beauxbatons?” She asked, peering at the older boy curiously.

Jacques laughed and nodded, his eyes twinkling even in the darkness. “Yes I am... It isn’t zat ‘ard to tell huh?” He asked, grinning.

Hermione managed a laugh, shaking her head. “No, you all have that French accent and those distinct French features. Are you enjoying your stay at Hogwarts so far?” She asked, raising her eyebrows.

Jacques nodded, though reluctantly as he met her gaze. “Yes I am but I couldn’t ‘elp notice ze discrimination you all ‘ave here for one anuzzer... You all seem to be very segregated in different ‘ouses...” He said skeptically.

“Excuse me...” A cold voice behind them interrupted, causing Hermione to turn around, her eyes widening in panic when she saw Harry glaring at her behind them, his emerald eyes glowing with anger even in the darkness.

“May I cut in?” He asked, a poisonous hiss in his voice as he clearly wasn’t waiting for an answer, shoving the other boy rudely aside and looking very intently at Hermione.

“Hey, wait a minute, I was—”

“Just leaving.” Harry interrupted, giving Jacques a cold, malicious sneer as the older boy caught sight of the scar on his forehead and the earring on his left ear, causing him immediately to back off.

“Yeah, you’re right, I was just leaving.” He agreed hastily, giving Harry a sheepish, nervous smile before he sauntered off, not wanting to get in the way of the feared Slytherin he had heard about a lot of times already.

Hermione glared at him very angrily, her brown eyes flashing in fury as Harry turned back to give her a forced smile, obviously trying hard to control his wild temper once again.

“What do *you* want, Potter? Come to gloat? I was having a perfectly good time before you had to go and be the rude, selfish jerk you are

and scare my dance partner away.” She snapped at him, shaking in anger.

Harry’s smile instantly turned into an angry sneer as he glared accusingly at her, angry at how Hermione had the nerve to be angry at *him* when it was her that had been dancing around so many boys the whole night.

He forcefully tried to swallow his anger, remembering that this was the first time Hermione had talked to him for over a week now ever since the whole incident in the corridors and he didn’t want to screw it up again.

“I was just wondering if you would care to dance with me, Granger.” Harry said slowly, his voice calm and measured as he forced the anger out of it.

Hermione answered him with a sneer of her own, crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing him in utter disgust. “Why don’t you go and ask your partner, *Parvati* for a dance, Potter? After all, in your own words Potter, *she’s* your girl.” She spat out spitefully, glaring at him.

Harry’s heart sank down all the way to the floor but he refused to let it show, looking grimly at Hermione. “I... I—”

“And after all, weren’t you just saying a week ago that you two *belong* together? That you missed *her* and that no one else could satisfy your *lust* except *her*?!” She snapped again, her eyes blazing.

“I was wrong, Hermione, I—”

“*Don’t* call me that, Potter! Don’t you ever call me by my first name again!” She hissed, flinging back the hand Harry had used to reach out for her own, causing the boy to blink in surprise and rejection.

Hermione thought as though she had seen a tear of heartbreak glisten in the Slytherin’s eyes before it was gone in a flash and was replaced by the familiar glint of malice when he gave her a hateful sneer.

“Oh yeah, *mudblood*? Well how about you, huh?! Going with Krum! No wonder you didn’t tell me who it was, the loser! Is that who you’re trying to prove against me? *Krum*? Is that who you’re trying to rival against *me*?” Harry asked, laughing mockingly.

Hermione’s eyes blazed again, looking utterly enraged as she barely even prevented herself from slapping the Slytherin hard on the cheek, not wanting to attract the other people’s attention on the dance floor.

“He may not be as good-looking or as charming as you are Potter but he’s got a quality that automatically puts him right above *you*- He’s not a self-centered, selfish and two-timing jerk!” She hissed back in indignation.

“And he’s exactly your type, isn’t he? A brain-dead loser!” Harry retorted, his eyes glinting now in obvious jealousy.

“The only loser around here is *you*, Potter! Viktor is ten times the man you will ever be, if you are a man at all that is because frankly, Viktor was right! You’re nothing but a mere child who seeks for attention!” She replied furiously.

Harry’s eyes clouded over dangerously, stepping forward in challenge, causing Hermione to step back and almost bump into a couple dancing behind them but she couldn’t make out who they were in the dark.

“So that’s it huh? You choose *Viktor*...Or are you sure you choose *Viktor* or that other guy you were just dancing with, Granger? Huh? Because frankly, it seems every single time I’ve looked at you tonight, you’re dancing with another boy, you good-for-nothing *slut*!” He snapped but as soon as the word had slipped from his mouth, he wished desperately he could take it back.

Hermione’s eyes clouded over again but this time, it was because of hurt, not anger and the sight of those hurt-filled eyes was enough to drive Harry over the edge again, causing him to flinch in shame and disgust at himself.

*Wow... I’ve only been talking to her three minutes and I managed to hurt her already again... Why the fuck do I keep screwing up?! He*

thought as Hermione took another step back from him, her eyes still filled with hurt but her face twisted in anger.

"I'm *not* a slut, *Harry*... I've never been anything like a slut my whole life... You should know that by now as well as I do after all we've been through... I have never even *kissed* by anyone else except you and I certainly have never slept with anyone all my life... I'm not like *you*." She finished coldly, a tear slipping down her cheek as she turned away from him.

"If you're looking for a slut, I suggest looking into a nearby mirror or if not, looking at that date of yours you call a girlfriend and you'll find what you're looking for. But don't you ever think for *one* minute that I would allow you to call *me* one just because I haven't given you what you wanted. Because for once in your life, I made you *fail*..." Hermione drawled coldly, her voice flat and unforgiving.

Her words all kept piercing right through his chest as soon as she spoke them, wanting nothing more than to take back what he had said and wrap her in his arms once again, assuring her that he didn't mean a word he had said.

Hermione was anything *but* a slut... She had never been anything more than pure... Innocent and true... He didn't even know where such an idea had come from but he could certainly affirm that it was not at all true...

That was the reason he had fallen in love with her in the first place... Because she was innocent... She was untainted, unlike he was... She was as white as a dove and that was one of the reasons he found her so alluring.

She was strong enough not to let herself be touched by those who would dirty her and she was the kind of girl that respected herself for who she was, not demoting herself to a mere love toy as the other girls he had been with.

She was strong *and* independent... A girl who did not let herself be treated any lower than she deserved and yet, did not succumb as low as those other girls' levels and it was this and everything else about

her that made Hermione the most beautiful, the most desirable girl to Harry...

Hermione didn't say anything, just standing there with her back to him as though she was trying to compose herself before she finally gathered up the strength and began walking away, leaving Harry staring after her retreating form in sadness and misery.

*I will not let her get away again.. I won't let her slip through my fingers like before... I'm willing to fight for her, dammit!* He thought angrily as he snapped out of his thoughts and bolted after her, wrapping his arms desperately around her waist.

"Hermione, please! I'm sorry.... I'm sorry for everything I've said, everything I've done to hurt you, please... I'm sorry..." He whispered pleadingly, wrapping his arms around her tightly, Hermione's back pressed to his chest.

Hermione fought against him, trying to wrench herself away from his arms but it only made Harry tighten them around her more, refusing to let the girl go because he knew if he did, he would never get another chance with her again.

"Harry, let go of me! Let me go, I don't want to do this anymore! I've had enough, I don't want anymore! I can't *take* anymore pain! I don't want to be hurt anymore!" She protested, crying softly as she tried to twist herself from him.

But Harry refused to let her go, spinning her around gently to face him and pressing their bodies together, trying to calm her by stroking her back tenderly and holding her in his warm embrace as their forms seemed to fit each other perfectly like a puzzle.

*"Please, Harry! I can't handle all the hurt you give me anymore! I want out! Let me go, please! Let me go before I lose the strength I have left and allow myself to stay!"* Hermione sobbed into his chest, furiously trying to push him away but weaker than before.

"I never meant to hurt you, Hermione... I'm sorry... Please, give me another chance..." Harry said softly, his voice shaking as his own tears fell at seeing the intense hurt on her face.



“Harry... I’ve already given you another chance! Over and over and over again but you just keep on throwing it away! I have nothing left for myself now thanks to you! You just kept taking from me, dammit, now let me go!” Hermione pleaded with him, pounding on his chest with her fists but Harry caught them and held them gently.

He met her gaze intently as she promptly stopped struggling and looked up at him, her cheeks streaked with tears and her eyes glistening with the ones that were still threatening to fall down.

“Please... I’m sorry... For *everything*...For every single fucked-up thing I did to hurt you and for everything I’ve done... I know I don’t have a right to ask for your forgiveness after all this but please just accept the fact that I’m sorry... I have never been sorry so much in my life but I am...*Right now*...” He whispered, his eyes glistening as well.

Hermione stopped struggling but refused to say anything, her eyes still dead and lifeless as she listened to him, staring at him with a masked face.

“Hermione... You’re anything *but* a slut... I didn’t mean what I said... I was just angry at you... I was... I just couldn’t bear the fact seeing you with any other guy except me...” He admitted, sighing.

Again he was answered by silence from the Gryffindor but he continued, wanting to get everything out before he lost his nerve once again.

“Hermione... I admit it... I was... I was *jealous*, okay? Jealous of Viktor Krum, jealous of that guy... I didn’t want to be but I was...” Harry told her, quirking his lips into a weak bitter smile.

Hermione just blinked and turned away, not struggling in his arms anymore but not leaning in either, just standing there in a trance-like state, unmoving and not showing any signs of emotions.

“You don’t have to say anything... I just wanted you to know... I don’t expect you to forgive me either but Hermione... When I hurt you that day... Every single part of me had died... Nothing was left except

shame and guilt and it tore me apart every fucking night!” Harry suddenly said, glaring at the floor.

“Parvati means absolutely nothing to me... I just asked her to the ball because I wanted to make you jealous the same way you made me feel. I thought it was all a game... I didn’t realize I could ever truly hurt you that deeply.” Harry whispered, turning away.

Once again, Hermione refused to respond but Harry gently tilted her chin up to look at him, finally seeing the sadness breaking out in those beautiful brown orbs that were looking intently at him.

“You don’t know this, Hermione but the times we’ve spent together have made me feel more alive, more like my real self than all my past years put together... You were the only girl who made me feel that way... No other one can affect me the way you do.” He told her softly, wiping her tears away with his thumb in a gentle caress.

“I know now how stupid I’ve been... I could never treat you the same way I treat those other girls because then I know I’d be hurting myself in the process... You were the only girl who saw me for who I am... Not for my looks or my popularity or fame at all...” Harry said, wiping another tear that Hermione had let fall.

“Please Hermione... I’ll do anything... Slap me right now, punch me in the face or whatever you want to do, just take out the hurt I’ve caused you on me.. I deserve it... I’ll endure whatever you want if it can help ease the anger and pain I caused...” Harry told her, his eyes shining in sincerity, something so rare it was almost hard to believe.

Hermione this time pulled away from him, her face perfectly calm and emotionless as Harry released her gently, watching her as she looked at him for a long period of time.

Then without warning, she had raised a single hand in the air and slapped him as hard as she could across his pale cheek, causing the boy to wince in pain as his head snapped to face the floor at the impact of the harsh slap but he didn’t say anything, looking at the floor in shame and disgust at himself.

The severe stinging in his cheek was almost too painful to bear but he barely even felt the pain at all, more concerned with the much more painful stinging in his chest rather than his cheek.

He hadn't even realized that the ring Hermione was wearing had cut a long but shallow wound across his flawless cheek as the gash immediately began to emit droplets of blood, which rolled down his cheek the same way his tears did and fell down onto the ground.

Harry just continued to stare down at the floor, refusing to meet her gaze as his vision slowly began blurring in tears again, not bothering to prevent them from falling down to the floor along with his blood.

He had never felt so hurt, humiliated and rejected his whole entire life... If he had known it hurt this much for someone to reject you, he probably would have lightened up when he had broken up with those other girls.

And what was worse... The rejection came from Hermione, and that fact alone was the most painful of all... He felt his Slytherin pride shrivel up into a crumpled ball inside him and felt as though he was stripped down bare... He felt like a little helpless child all over again...

There was nothing left to protect his inner self anymore.. All of the barriers, the walls he had built around himself, the protection he had worked so hard to put up these past years had been taken down by that single slap alone...

Everything... His mask, his pride, his entire being had been exposed relentlessly and he found that he could do nothing else but stand there, not having the courage to meet her eyes anymore...

No... His courage had been extinguished as well... Nothing was left at that very moment... If he thought before only AJ had the power to penetrate right through his thick walls, it seems he thought wrong...

Hermione had managed to break through all the ice surrounding him and see him right as the scared little boy he really was inside... He knew he was probably the most pathetic creature she had ever seen right now... He disgusted himself at that moment...

Draco was right all along after all... He was weak... Hermione could see right through him now... Now he just felt so defenseless and powerless... Seems ironic that Harry Potter, one of the next powerful wizards in the world, was now *powerless* as it seemed...

It was as if, in telling Hermione how he felt... In opening up to her like this, he had given her the key to unlock all the doors to him and she had used it already with that harsh slap and boom, all his defenses gone...

He had never shown this side to anyone but his twin alone and now, as he stood there trembling in front of Hermione, he felt so useless that he finally turned around, not wanting to show his face anymore.

"I s-see... Y-you don't have to patronize me anymore, G-Granger... Y-you've proved your point... You win..." He whispered in a dead, bitter whisper, angry tears streaking his face as he attempted to walk off but Hermione grabbed his hand, causing him to look at her, though *very* fearfully.

Looking up, she saw something that made his heart turn... Hermione's eyes were no longer dead and lifeless but they were shining in warmth... In comfort and...*Understanding*... He thought, trembling.

She was still crying but her eyes were sparkling with life once again and for the first time in over a week, it was directed at *him*...

*She understands me... She actually understands me and... She's actually forgiving me after everything I've done...* Harry realized, his heart clenching again as he held her gaze steadily.

She gently raised a hand to stroke his unwounded cheek, wiping his tears away as had done to her earlier, leaning over and letting her lips caress the tender skin for a long moment, causing his breath to hitch in his throat.

Then she pulled away and allowed Harry to see the forgiving look in her beautiful brown eyes as they glowed beautifully in the darkness at him, both of them no longer aware of the other couples on the dance floor or the soft music that was playing in the room.

Hermione gently turned Harry's face so that the bleeding cheek was facing her before she gently trailed her gloved hand at the open wound, this time finally causing Harry to wince in pain but he didn't say anything, still nervous and fearful of being rejected once again.

He didn't notice Hermione's eyes cloud over in guilt as she saw how the ugly cut had marked itself onto Harry's flawless skin, staining the pale flesh with it dried blood as the fresh wound continued to bleed some more, the drops of blood running down his cheek.

Harry closed his eyes as Hermione gently caressed the bruised cheek as well, the pain suddenly disappearing wherever her fingers had grazed his skin but Hermione soon took out her wand from the pocket in her skirt and flicked it over the cheek, healing the cut up instantly and leaving the skin perfect once again.

He opened his eyes slowly as Hermione leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on the healed cheek as well before she finally turned to him, her face not revealing what she felt but her eyes showing him that she had already forgiven him.

He didn't say anything but instead, wrapped his arms around her again, burying his face into her neck and closing his eyes, savoring the feeling of her warm body pressed against his trembling one.

"You hurt me... Harry... You really hurt me..." She said quietly, turning away briefly but not pulling away from the warm embrace, her hands on rubbing his back soothingly as the boy seemed to relax in the gesture.

"I know..." He murmured shakily into her neck, his voice a hoarse, uncertain whisper that she almost didn't hear his words at all if he hadn't been so close.

"And I don't think I can handle that kind of pain again... I've already endured so much these past months because of you... I can't even be certain of how much tears you've cost me already... Or if I can handle being with you again..." She said softly, resting her own head on his shoulder.

Harry's shoulders sagged at her words but he simply refused to pull away, instead, tightening his arms around her even more, almost too scared to free her from his embrace.

Instead of answering her, he just forced himself to nod weakly, wrenching his eyes shut very tightly and trying to calm the beating of his heart, knowing Hermione could feel it pounding rapidly.

"In fact... I'm not so sure of anything else anymore, Harry... My mind *and* my heart is a complete blank thanks to you... You've pushed to me to the very brink of even hating myself... Everything is just so - *fucked-up*, Harry..." Hermione whispered, clenching her hands into tight fists.

Harry couldn't find the strength to answer in anyway this time, just remaining silent and holding his breath as he waited painfully for the rejection he could already sense coming.

"But I *am* sure of one thing, Harry... Just *one* thing..." Hermione finally said, pulling back and meeting his tear-stained, lost face, smiling very softly at the 'little boy' in Harry she saw in his expression.

Harry bit his lip at the loss of Hermione's arms wrapped around him and her body pressed onto his but he forced himself to meet her gaze, expecting the absolute worst to come out of her mouth.

"And it's the fact that... It's the fact that I..." Hermione's voice trailed away as she turned, her cheeks flushing and her eyes glazing over in fear.

"It's the fact that I *love* you, Harry..." She whispered, her voice not even audible but Harry caught every word, feeling the floor beneath him give way as he stumbled back slightly, his swollen eyes widening so much it was painful.

He felt his knees buckle slightly and his heart start jumping up and down repeatedly in his chest but he could handle all of that for now, instead, looking at Hermione intently, turning her around to face him so he could see the sincerity in her eyes.

“Wh-what? What did you say, Hermione?” He croaked out, earning him a small choked-up laugh from Hermione as his voice had sounded like a squeak.

“I said... I love—”

She never got to finish the rest when Harry took her arm and pulled her to him, pressing his lips firmly onto hers and wrapping a strong arm around her waist, his other hand cupping her cheek.

Hermione’s eyes widened in surprise but she soon relaxed into the embrace and kissed him back earnestly, placing her hands on both sides of his face as he leaned in some more, kissing her so passionately as though he had been wanting to for years.

Using her thumbs, she stroked his cheeks very tenderly, surprisingly causing the Slytherin to tremble slightly as he stroked her own cheek and deepened the kiss so suddenly that Hermione had gasped in surprise.

Harry used that advantage to press her closer onto him, their bodies tingling in pleasure at the comforting contact just as he moved the hand on her cheek to the back of her neck to pull her face closer to his, causing her to squirm at the ticklish feeling.

Sensing this, Harry seemed to smile lovingly into the kiss, using that very same hand to travel down the slender curve of her neck onto her shoulders, pushing aside the thin strap of her gown so he could caress the bare skin with his fingers.

Hermione shivered at the delightful contact as Harry let his lips travel from hers to trail down her jaw line, trailing a line of feather-light kisses down the same path he had traced down her neck until he got to her shoulder, pressing a long, sweet kiss on the bare skin.

Now caught in the heat of the moment, Hermione impatiently tilted his chin up for him to meet her gaze again, seeing Harry’s eyes shining with a new kind of love she had never seen before.

Giving him a small comforting smile to ease the Slytherin’s sudden nervousness at being interrupted, she put her hands behind his neck

and pulled him towards her again, forcing their lips to meet again as she felt Harry relax into the kiss, taking control of the moment once more.

She slipped the hands on his neck under the tux he wore to caress the very top skin of his bare back for a moment, somehow comforted by the heat radiated from the skin as she felt Harry shiver in the pleasure yet again, closing his eyes in the wonderful feeling.

Finally, both having an immense need for air, Harry slowed the kiss down to a gentle caress before he pulled back very slowly, meeting her gaze steadily as his eyes glistened in unhidden emotions, a single tear slipping down to his cheeks once more.

This time, however, it wasn't because of pain but it was because of this kind of love he was feeling for the first time...

He didn't say anything but at that very moment, he didn't have to at all... No words were needed anymore as his eyes and his actions spoke for him and Hermione seemed to understand well, just resting her face onto his shoulder and closing her eyes, sighing deeply.

A fond smile on his face, he gently moved the strap he had pushed aside back onto her shoulder before resting it back on her slender waist with his other hand, both of them swaying very gently to the beat of the music as the glitters around the Great Hall began to cascade down onto the dancing couples, showering onto their heads as they danced in each other's arms.

Hermione just buried her head onto Harry's shoulder, inhaling deeply and taking in the boy's wonderfully familiar scent, content to finally be dancing with the boy she really loved... She didn't want to be anywhere else at that very moment except in Harry's arms...

At that moment, she just forgot about the fact that both she and Harry had come with different dates for that evening... All that didn't seem to matter now... All that mattered was that they were dancing together... *Together*... That was all that mattered... Nothing more...

She couldn't even remember where they were anymore... Or that the dance floor was filled with couples just in the same fantasy world she



and Harry were in themselves... Everything else except for Harry seemed to be a complete blur... A swirl of mist around them.

The only thing that registered in her ears was the sound of gentle melody of the music... Harry's peaceful, gentle breathing and the relaxing beating of Harry's heart which she could feel through her own chest...

The glitters were falling down upon them now, littering themselves on their hair or on the floor but she couldn't care less... She just didn't want to pull back from Harry at the moment...

It was as if she was in the safest place she could ever be but if she pulled back from his arms, the world would soon reappear in her eyes, bringing her back into the cruel reality.

Harry had long buried his face into her neck as they danced, his lips gently planting soft gentle kisses on the skin, each kiss speaking for him how much Hermione could sense that the feelings she had for him was returned.

Just earlier that night, she had been telling herself over and over again how much she didn't want to handle Harry anymore or how much she didn't want to lose herself with him again as much as she loved him but now, she finally realized...

She would endure any kind of pain she could handle... If she could feel like this again... If only to be in his arms like this, she would take on any kind of hurt she could bear... Just to have this feeling again and again...

*I guess love can really make you believe you actually want to do stupid things...* She finally realized, allowing a small smile to grace her delicate face.

Harry seemed to be steering her through the crowd of dancers, his arms never leaving her slender waist as he held her to him, a small smile on his face but hidden into Hermione's neck.

"Hermione?" He murmured, his voice a soft whisper but Hermione heard it clearly, answering by caressing his neck softly.

"I... I want to show you something..." He whispered, kissing her neck again as Hermione squirmed once more, feeling Harry chuckle very lightly.

"What is it Harry?" She asked, keeping her eyes closed as Harry led her to a dark secluded part of the dance floor, his arms still firmly holding her to him.

"Actually... It's something I don't actually want you to see but I want you to *hear*..." He whispered, slowly taking his wand out of his pocket and holding it firmly in his hand.

Hermione heard him whisper a spell, causing her to attempt to pull back but Harry tightened his arms around her, refusing to let her go.

"Harry? What was that spell?" She asked in confusion but she allowed herself to rest her head on his shoulders again, her eyebrows fused together in question.

Harry didn't answer, slipping his wand back into his pocket before he smiled and kissed her cheek reassuringly. "Touch my hand, Hermione..." He whispered though his own hand was shaking nervously.

Hermione's eyes sparkled with curiosity again but she slowly took the hand she had on his shoulder and placed it very gently on the hand Harry hand around her waist, still slightly confused as she waited for something to happen.

She was about to ask why she had touched his hand when she heard soft musical words begin to fill her ears in a surprisingly familiar melody, which caused Hermione's eyes to widen and tear up at the same time.

*"Whenever sang my songs... On the stage... On my own..."* She felt the tears began to fill up rapidly now as she recognized the beautiful song, looking up and meeting Harry's sparkling eyes and loving smile.

"Oh my god... Harry... It's..." She didn't finish her sentence but Harry understood perfectly, only offering a smile before he pulled her to him

again, Hermione resting her head back on his shoulders, not taking her hand off his.

*Eyes on me... My favorite song... Somehow... He found a spell to...* Hermione couldn't even finish her own simple train of thought as the tears of happiness began falling down her cheeks, a small touched smile on her face as she listened to the lyrics...

*"Whenever said my words... Wishing they would be heard... I saw you smiling at me... Was it real or just my fantasy... You'd always be there in the corner... Of this tiny little bar..."* Hermione closed her eyes, softly singing along with the meaningful lyrics as she felt Harry's arms tighten around her in response.

*"My last night here for you... Same old songs, just once more... My last night here with you... Maybe yes... Maybe no... I kind of liked it your way... How you shyly placed your eyes on me..."*

Harry leaned over to her ear, a smile on his face and his eyes sparkling with an emotion he never thought he'd feel as he whispered the last line of the stanza into her ear...

*"Oh did you ever know? That I had mine... On you..."* He sang into her ear, his voice very soft but she caught every word, pulling back and immediately pressing her lips onto his, kissing him like she never had before just as the song moved on to the chorus...

*"Darling so there you are... With that look on your face... As if you're never hurt... As if you're never down... Shall I be the one for you... Who pinches you softly but sure... If frown is shown then... I will know that you are no dreamer..."*

Most of the other couples on the dance floor had began heading back to their tables but Harry and Hermione were among the very few that stayed, still kissing each other tenderly in the corner to the graceful song ringing in their ears.

Pulling back, Hermione rested her head on his shoulder again and snuggled up to him gently, Harry's chin resting on her head as he stroked her hair tenderly, his eyes fluttered shut as they danced to the words of the song they knew only they could hear.

*“So let me come to you... Close as I wanna be... Close enough for me... To feel your heart, beating fast... And stay there as I whisper... How I loved your peaceful eyes on me... Oh did you ever know... That I had mine... On you...”*

Harry allowed another smile as he leaned down and kissed Hermione's forehead, feeling more content than he had ever been with her dancing with him, each one sharing the heat of the warmth of the other's body.

*“Darling, so share with me... Your love if you have enough... Your tears you're holding back... Or pain if that's what it is... How can I let you know... I'm more than the dress and the voice... Just reach for me then.. You will know that you are not dreaming...”*

At this point, Hermione had forgotten about everything else that had happened that night... She had forgotten about coming with Viktor... About Parvati... About Ron and Seamus... But most of all... She had forgotten the anger she had directed at Harry...

At that very moment... She felt nothing more than love for her once Slytherin enemy... She couldn't even remember the Slytherin Harry was before they had started the school year... All that mattered was how sure she was of this feeling and how much she wanted it to last...

Harry slowed them down as the song ended with the chorus once more and almost immediately, Hermione had pulled back and had yanked him close for a kiss again, causing the Slytherin to chuckle slightly in amusement.

“I love you...” She whispered into the kiss right before she leaned in and deepened the kiss even more, kissing him with a hunger and intensity that she didn't even know she had, wrapping both her arms around his neck once more as she melted against him, the world around them fading once again...

After a long period of dancing and making out on the dance floor, as much as Harry wanted to remain there in Hermione's arms, he widened his eyes as he had forgotten about the present he was going

to give Hermione that night, realizing the gift was still back at his room.

Pulling back, though rather reluctantly, he pressed his forehead to hers and gave her a soft smile, caressing her cheek gently. "Hey... I almost forgot... I have another surprise for you..." He told her, causing the girl to make a face.

He laughed lightly, shaking his head before he pulled out of their embrace, already frowning at the loss of the body contact as Hermione gave him another curious look.

"Can you meet me in outside in the gardens in ten minutes?" He asked, squelching Hermione's protest with a kiss on the lips.

"The gardens? But Harry, why can't I just wait for you here?" She asked softly, looking around, indicating the dark dance floor but Harry shook his head, gently moving the glittering lock of brown hair that had fallen into her face.

"I want to give it you in private... Even if the dance floor is dark... I don't want other people in the room... And besides.. All this glitter is annoying me!" He added, scowling as he dusted the glitter off his hair.

Hermione couldn't help laughing softly to herself, giving him a pointed look in response. "I think the glitter is romantic, Harry." She told him.

Harry's annoyed scowl instantly turned into a sheepish smile, scratching his head adorably at her. "Oh, well then maybe it isn't all that bad... But I really want to give it to you somewhere private... Please?" He asked, turning to her with pleading emerald eyes.

Hermione couldn't help breaking into a smile, her features softening at the puppy dog look in the Slytherin's eyes. "Fine, Harry... I'll meet you there in ten minutes... I have to say good night to Viktor anyway." She realized, shrugging at him.

Harry instantly stiffened in anger, his emerald eyes immediately reverting from affectionate to a jealous anger that Hermione was all too familiar with already. Stepping forward, she placed her hand gently

on his cheek and turned his face to meet hers, giving him a brief but reassuring kiss which seemed to relax his tense form.

“Harry... I love *you*...” She told him and her words were enough to calm him down once again as he managed a weak smile, nodding though a slight reluctance in his face.

“I’ll meet you there in *less* than ten minutes... Don’t worry.” She told him as she gave him a last smile, leaning forward and placing a fond kiss on his scar before walking back through the sea of dancers, leaving Harry watching her with a big stupid smile on his handsome face.

*So this was what AJ was feeling earlier... I was wrong... This Yule Ball is turning out to be one of the greatest nights in my life...* He thought, walking out of the Great Hall out into the bright corridors where he saw other couples making out but he didn’t bother looking at any of them.

*She ‘loves’ me... Hermione actually ‘loves’ me... After everything I put her through... She can still manage to love a bastard like me...* He thought, his features softening as he began making his way quickly back to the dungeons, wanting to be with Hermione once again.

Then, thinking twice, he broke out into a run, laughing at his own eagerness, causing some of the Hufflepuffs in the corridor to look at him in absolute fear and shock, certain that the Slytherin was up to something.

Rolling his eyes at their suspicions, he headed off and muttered the password to the Slytherin common room, racing up the boys’ dorms and grabbing the wrapped present on his bed before storming back outside, slamming the door lightly behind him.

“Hi Harry!! Where are off to?!” A shrill, flirtatious suddenly said, causing Harry to jump slightly to see Pansy Parkinson smiling charmingly at him, walking back into the Common room with Lila Perrine, both girls coming returning the ball.

“Sod off, Parkinson... Go snog Crabbe or something.” Harry snapped impatiently, not even giving the two girls a second glance before he brushed past them, ignoring their gasps of insult.

He checked his watch for a minute as he raced out of the common room, noting that he had five more minutes before he sped up, running down the corridor and avoiding the other Slytherins he had run into who were all asking him where he was heading off to but he refused to answer them.

He managed to crash himself right into Draco who was heading back to the Slytherin dungeons as well, sending the both of them crashing to the floor painfully, both boys cursing out loud.

“Ow, fuck! Potter, watch where you’re going will you?! Anyway, where are you going? The ball is just about over!” He asked him but Harry had already jumped back up and had run off, failing to notice the miserable look on his best friend’s face or failing to notice that his sister was nowhere in sight.

Draco looked after him in confusion, fusing his eyebrows suspiciously before he sighed and shrugged, picking himself off the floor and heading back to the dungeons as Harry rounded the corner again, checking his watch once more.

“*Harry James Potter!*” A female voice shrieked in the corridor, causing Harry to groan out loud and run faster as he heard Parvati’s footsteps trailing after him, already sensing another ran from the annoying girl.

“Sod off, woman... I’m not in the mood for your crap right now.” Harry said coldly, slowing his run into a walk but Parvati was obviously not going to give up, raising her wand and yelling out the first curse that came into her head.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*”

Harry sighed as the curse zoomed past his ear, missing him by a whole inch but he stopped anyway, waiting impatiently as Parvati ran to catch up with him, cursing and growling darkly under his breath.

“Where have you been all night?! You can’t just desert me like that; I’m your partner for Merlin’s sake!” She hissed at him, stepping in front of his path and raising a hand to slap him but Harry caught her hand easily and flung it back roughly, causing her to gasp.

“Harry! How *dare* you treat me like that! I’m your *girlfriend*, in case you’ve forgotten! You should respect me and—”

“Look, before you start going off into another useless rant, would you move out of my way?! Now is not the best time to get on my nerves.” Harry snapped coldly, glaring at her in a scarily calm manner.

“Oh so now, *you* have the nerve to be angry at *me*?! I don’t know why I put up with you Harry! There are dozens of other guys here that are just willing to grovel for me if I ask them to and here I am wasting my time with you! You forget, *Potter*, I’m one of the most popular, sought-after girls in school!” She snapped authoritatively at him.

Harry just responded with a sneer, looking highly amused and pissed off at the same time. “Then why can’t you get *them* to be your boyfriend, because frankly, I’m dumping you.” He said flatly, walking around her and continuing down the corridor.

Parvati’s eyes flashed dangerously as she raced in front of him again, holding her wand out and pointing it dangerously at his chest, narrowing her eyes in challenge.

“No you are *not*, Harry, you are not doing this to me twice. I won’t let you, you *need* me and apparently, you’re too dense to admit it to yourself.” She said angrily, the desperate tone in her voice betraying her own boldness.

Harry snorted in amusement, using a single finger to push her wand back down, leaning over and giving the girl a mocking kiss on the cheek before he grinned again and sauntered off, whistling cheerfully to himself. Parvati saw nothing but red at the rude, arrogant gesture, shooting her wand back up as her eyes glinted in a scarily wild, maniacal look of rejection and blinding fury.

“You fucking bastard! Don’t think I’m just letting you walk away from me like this again! *No one* dumps a Patil without suffering the



consequences! And more importantly, *no one... no fucking one* dumps Parvati Patil twice!" She screamed at him but Harry didn't even flinch, smirking to himself in malicious amusement.

"Well sucks to be you then, Patil... I can't help it if you fell for the same ploy twice. Who knew you were that stupid? I mean, you're not a Hufflepuff right? Maybe they put you in the wrong house because frankly, I know Gryffindors are smarter than that. Don't worry though, I've had worse." Harry said, letting out a sneer as he walked on.

"You won't get away with this, Harry! I'll make sure you suffer for this! I'm not about to take this lying down!" Parvati raged at him, shaking with anger.

Harry couldn't help laugh loudly at the sick hidden meaning in her words as he promptly turned around and gave Parvati a smirk with a wink, enraging the girl even more.

"Well apparently you already did... More than just *twice* if I may say so but don't be proud of it... It wasn't all that wonderful." He drawled sarcastically, sniggering.

Parvati let out a loud scream again, her eyes now wild as she whipped her wand around frantically, trying to think of a spell to throw at the jerk.

"Well, it's not my fault you're the only girl who seemed to let herself get used twice. But you know what I think, Patil? You knew all along I wasn't really serious about you didn't you? You knew it all along and you didn't want to believe it yourself. Stupid bitch that you are..." Harry said coldly, regarding her with a look of disdain.

"*STUPEFY!*"

Harry sighed as the curse missed him again but this time, he had enough. He whipped out his own wand and pointed it at the wild girl, muttering a spell lazily under his breath.

"*Caninus morphis!*"

Almost instantly, Parvati seemed to widen her eyes in shock as she seemed to grow smaller and smaller, causing Harry to grin as he peered down at her, watching as Parvati finally opened a mouth to scream but before she could, she transformed into a small female dog, the scream coming out as a bark.

Sneering sadistically, Harry looked down at the dog again, placing his wand back inside the pocket of his tux with a grim smile.

"Now you can really be the *bitch* you are... For a good couple of hours at least." He muttered darkly before he whirled around again, walking off once more towards the gardens, checking his watch to make sure he wasn't late.

Harry let out a breath of relief when he saw the door that led to the Hogwarts gardens, letting himself rest against the wall for a minute to catch his breath before he sauntered outside, looking around.

He froze in surprise however when he saw Prof. Snape walking around the garden with a dark scowl on his face, pointing his wand at certain rosebushes and blasting them apart.

Harry smirked in amusement as several couples ran out of the bushes and bolted away from Snape, as the Potions professor began barking out just how much points they had lost as they ran away.

*Seems Prof. Snape knows too much from me already that he's using it to catch other students...* He thought chuckling, recalling how Snape had smirked at him when he told him about how students liked to use the rose bushes as a spot for making out.

He stood up and was about to walk over to his head of house when he finally noticed Prof. Karkaroff trailing after Snape, looking very disturbed as he kept indicating something on his arm.

"Honestly I don't see what the fuss is all about, Igor! Quit bugging me about it!" Snape snapped at him from over his shoulder just as he blew another rose bush apart, revealing, to Harry's amusement, Weasley and Lavender, both looking very flustered.

“Weasley! Brown! What were you doing in there?!” Snape asked, sneering at the two Gryffindors in sadistic amusement as Weasley shot Brown a dirty look, dusting his robes and flushing angrily.

“Nothing, Prof. Snape, Lavender just wanted me to walk with her to the garden and we fell into the rose bush.” He said, blushing furiously at Lavender’s hurt glare at him.

“We did *not*, Ron! *You* perfectly know as much as *I* do that—”

“I don’t care *what* you both were doing! You’re both still not supposed to be here! 15 points from Gryffindor now move it!” Prof. Snape barked again, causing the two Gryffindors to jump and hurry off back into the castle nervously.

Prof. Karkaroff, who had watched the scene with a smirk of his own, now turned back to Snape insistently, giving him an exasperated look.

“Severus, you cannot pretend nothing is happening! It has obviously become clearer and clearer for a long time now! Frankly, I’m getting worried and—”

“Then, *flee*, Karkaroff! Just like you always have, *flee* like the coward that you are and I shall cover for you but I am remaining at Hogwarts.” Snape interrupted curtly, glaring at him.

*Since when did Prof. Snape call Karkaroff by his first name? I thought he loathed the guy...* Harry mused for a second before Snape spotted him, raising an eyebrow curiously at him.

“Mr. Potter? What are you doing here all *alone*? Where are you hiding the girl?” He asked, giving Harry a pointed, knowing look.

Harry smiled innocently, pretending to look offended at the implied comment. “Why Professor! I’m *hurt*, do you think I came here to meet someone?” He asked, a look of mock-horror on his face.

Prof. Snape chuckled in amusement while Karkaroff eyed the two Slytherins in shock and disbelief, raising an eyebrow suspiciously at Harry. “Professor, if I may ask, what are *you* doing out here?” He

asked in a voice so innocent to be trusted but Snape didn't seem to mind, nodding.

"Nothing, Harry... Just continue to meet whoever it is you're meeting but make sure you're back at the dungeons within an hour. I do not want you staying late here just for a make-out session." He told Harry, offering a fond smile at the boy as Karkaroff looked at Snape in surprise.

"Severus?! You are just going to allow this *boy*, just because he's a student of yours, to remain out here to make out?!" He asked in shock, sputtering. Snape and Harry just exchanged smirks again, Harry nodding in agreement to his Professor's earlier statement.

"Of course, Igor. Young Mr. Potter here, as hard as it may be for you to believe, is one of the two top students in my class, along with Lucius Malfoy's son, Draco. He is, one of my most trusted students in my house. No doubt I can trust him to stay out of trouble unlike those other dunderheads." Snape drawled slowly as he brushed past Harry, patting the boy for a moment on the back.

"Oh and Mr. Potter." Snape called over his shoulder just as he passed Harry, looking back at the smirking student.

"Try to keep somewhere discreet okay? It's more decent. And for Merlin's sake, do *not* demote yourself into those rose bushes you've told me about." Snape said, shaking his head as Karkaroff sputtered in horror after him again.

With that, Prof. Snape walked on, his cloak billowing behind him, Karkaroff hurrying after him with a disapproving look, shaking his head and muttering something about "Snape and his favoritism..."

Harry just laughed and looked around again, finally noticing that the garden was nearly empty now except for a couple of students Harry could make out hidden behind a couple of bushes.

Curious, he stood up and peered at them, catching sight of a very busy Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies behind the bushes and surprisingly enough, Blaise and Hannah Abbott not too far away.

Harry looked away in disgust, shaking his head before he caught sight of Hagrid and Madam Maxime in the garden as well, both their huge frames obvious but Harry decided to leave them alone, not wanting to intrude on it as he looked away with a very disturbed look on his handsome face.

“Potter.” A voice hissed, causing Harry to jump and fall flat on the ground on his rear end in surprise, looking up to see Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang staring down at him in both confusion and suspicion which Harry returned with a cold sneer.

“What do *you* want, Diggory?” He asked coldly, rising up the floor and dusting himself before raising his eyebrow at the couple.

“And where’s my sister? She had better be safe for your own sake...” Harry added threateningly, his eyes glinting but Cedric shook his head, giving him a pointed look.

“AJ’s already back in the dungeons. She left the Ball earlier than everyone else... Anyway, may I ask what on *earth* are you doing here?” Cedric asked loudly, causing Harry’s eyes to widen as he glared at him.

“Shh!! Pipe down, Hufflepuff! You want to get caught?!” He hissed, checking to make sure Fleur and Roger hadn’t heard them before turning to face Cedric’s suspicious glance and Cho’s amused smile.

“Oh... I get it... You’re *eavesdropping*, Harry...” Cho said knowingly, giving Harry a charming smile which he only returned by rolling his eyes, looking annoyed.

“So blow me, I couldn’t care less. Now what do you want, Diggory?” Harry snapped, raising his eyebrows expectantly at Cedric, checking his watch impatiently every now and then and glancing around the garden.

“Ah... Well... I just came here looking for you because I thought I’d give you some advice about the egg we champions have...” He said, looking around nervously to make sure no one was listening.

Harry just sneered maliciously, obviously not one to accept help from one of his opponents. "I don't *need* your help, Diggory. I've been handling the egg clue just fine." He lied, though knowing perfectly well he hadn't even started on the darn thing.

Cedric looked suspiciously annoyed, checking his watch again and looking around once more before speaking up.

"Look... I had a tip from one of the professors about how to solve the egg alright? And I figured... Well... Your twin sister *did* tell me about the dragons." He started.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he glared at him, looking shocked, annoyed and angry at the same time. "What?! AJ told you about the dragons?" He asked, his voice sounding incredulous.

This time Harry was sure Cedric was getting impatient as he began fidgeting around impatiently, wanting to leave.

"Yes, she did. She figured if every other champion knew about the task then it was only fair to tell me so I owe her one... Also, she *did* get me and Cho together tonight so I owe her a lot." He explained.

Harry just rubbed his forehead, groaning to himself as he sighed in exasperation and mild irritation. *My twin just had to have morals, now didn't she??* He thought, rolling his eyes.

He wasn't mad at her of course but he had to admit that he was a bit pissed off that AJ was always too keen on values such as fair play, honesty and all that crap... It seemed so unlikely as a Slytherin at times.

And helping Diggory and Chang get together? That was just too unbelievable for Harry's liking about his twin... He would have to talk to her sometime again to make sure she was still his sister...

"Fine, make it quick and tell me Diggory so I don't have to be seen talking to you anymore." Harry said, smirking back at the boy as Cedric narrowed his eyes at him in response, looking angry.

"You know, frankly Potter, if it was just *you*, I wouldn't even bother helping you out but seeing that you are AJ's twin, I'll forget about how rude you've always been. I shouldn't even be helping you." Cedric told him as Cho watched the two boys nervously.

"Well I didn't *ask* you for help but since you're ever so willing to give it anyway, then start talking, Hufflepuff." Harry said calmly, tapping his foot on the ground in impatience.

Cedric sighed but nodded, checking his watch one last time. "Look... About the egg... You should try solving it while taking a bath in the prefects bathroom... It'll take a lot off your mind and well... You'll have the clue solved after." He explained, though uncertainly.

Harry merely raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"That's it? Think about the bloody screeching egg while taking a bloody bath?? How the bloody hell is that supposed to help me, Diggory? Why don't you just tell me the bloody answer already?" He ranted but Cedric was already off, a smile of amusement on the older boy's face.

"Just take my *bloody* word on it, Potter. Have a *bloody* good night." He responded, causing Cho to giggle as they walked back inside the castle, leaving a grumbling Harry to his thoughts.

Still grumbling in irritation, he sighed and began to walk back to the fountain in the middle of the garden, his shiny black shoes scuffling on the ground but he stopped when he saw who was waiting for him with her back turned.

Hermione was looking up at the stars with a soft smile on her beautiful face as she wrapped her arms around herself, shivering as the cold night air made contact with the delicate skin her beautiful white gown exposed.

Harry couldn't help breaking out into a gentle, admiring smile as he took very soft, silent footsteps towards her, sneaking up behind the girl before slipping his arms around her waist, leaning down to kiss her shoulder.

Hermione smiled and closed her eyes, leaning back against him as Harry moved his arms to travel up bare arms, running them up and down the skin in an attempt to rid the girl of her shivers.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look in that gown, Ms. Granger?” He whispered into her ear just before placing soft kisses on her neck, causing Hermione to squirm at the gentle touch.

“Mmm... I believe not yet Mr. Potter but I kind of guessed right away when I saw you glaring at Viktor.” Hermione answered, a slightly teasing smile on her lips as Harry barely prevented his growl and tightened the arms around her waist.

Laughing, she rolled her eyes and placed her own hand over his, stroking it to calm him down. “You know, I almost forgot to thank you for such a wonderful dance, Harry...” She murmured, not bothering to open her eyes.

“You’re welcome... I wanted to make this night special for you... Especially after all the pain I’ve been causing you...” Harry said softly, resting his chin on her shoulder as he spoke.

Hermione stiffened slightly but didn’t say anything, not wanting to talk about that particular subject but Harry squeezed her gently to get her attention, placing another kiss on her cheek.

“I’m really sorry for everything... I don’t even deserve to have you forgive me but I’m glad you did... You know my eyes will be on no one else but you, Hermione...” He whispered, holding her closer against him.

Hermione felt her heart melt at his words but she refused to let him see her so affected, choosing instead to just nod silently.

“I... I’m glad I forgave you too...And... I’m sorry for going with Viktor, Harry... I just—” She didn’t finish when she felt Harry shake his head hastily, stopping her from finishing her sentence.

“*Don’t* say sorry, Hermione. You have nothing to say sorry about... It was my fault... All *my* fault...I shouldn’t have blown up on you the way I did... It just angered me so much that you would choose anyone



else besides me... That was the first time I've ever been rejected..." He admitted, looking away bitterly.

"Well... There's a first time for everything...No exceptions... Not even *you*, Harry Potter." Hermione whispered back in the same amount of bitterness, remembering how painful the experience had been.

Harry sighed, resting his chin on her shoulder again, closing his eyes in thought.

"I know... I know that now... You were right you know... I was a selfish, self-centered bastard who thinks of no one else but himself but see... Being who I am, I can't avoid that..." He admitted slowly.

"Well... You're not a self-centered jerk *most* of the time... You can also be the sweetest, most romantic, most affectionate guy I've known... Though if I tell other people that, they'd probably laugh right out in my face." Hermione said lightly, trying to ease the tension.

Harry finally let out a weak but sincere laugh at her words, shaking his head but silently agreeing to the comment. "I suppose so..." He said, still chuckling.

Hermione smiled and took one of the hands he had around her waist, planting a gentle, affectionate kiss on each finger before answering. "Thank you for the wonderful dance, Harry... It was the sweetest, most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me... Just being able to dance with *you*, to that song... I've always dreamed of experiencing a moment like that..." She whispered, sighing.

"The song is beautiful, Hermione... I never knew a single dance could feel that way... I knew right away that that would be the perfect song... I remember because you told me during our date... Remember?" He asked, stroking her cheek.

Hermione nodded, touched that Harry would remember her words. "I never knew you were such a romantic..." She told him, turning his hand over and planting a soft kiss on his palm.

“Only when it comes to *you*, Hermione...” He answered back easily, causing the girl to blush darkly in the dimly lit garden, coughing and turning away, obviously uncomfortable.

Fortunately, he seemed to notice her sudden uneasiness at the meaning he had implied so he just smiled secretly to himself, coughing as well. “Anyway... Just so you know... I saw your friend the Weasel here just a few minutes ago.” He told her, grinning but he scowled in pain when Hermione nudged him sharply.

“It’s *Ron* or *Weasley*, Harry. Pick one and make a choice, I’m not asking you to be nice to him but at least speak his name properly.” She said firmly, though she was secretly surprised when Harry scowled but nodded in defeat.

“Fine... *Weasley* then... I saw him here a couple of minutes ago... Snape caught him and as much as Weasley tried to deny it, I’m guessing he and Brown had been making out.” Harry said, sniggering.

Hermione’s jaw dropped open in disbelief as she gaped, her eyes bulging out of their sockets. “Ron and *Lavender*?! But... I thought Ron liked—” She stopped when she realized she was talking to Harry, immediately shutting her mouth in shock.

“Yes? Who does Weasley like?” Harry asked curiously, giving her a grin but Hermione shook her head hastily, waving the subject away instantly.

“No one... Forget it... Anyway, I happen to know that Lavender has been spending a lot of time with Ron lately but I didn’t expect this... Though it *does* make sense... They seem to be getting to know each other well these past days.” She mused, shrugging.

Her eyes widened though when she realized what Harry had just said. “They got caught?! But then, won’t Snape catch us here as well and get us in trouble?” She asked fearfully.

“Well, lucky for you I happen to be the favorite student of Prof. Snape and he just so happened to see me here already about five minutes ago. Don’t worry about it, he’s the only one patrolling the gardens at

night anyway. Looking through rose bushes.” He added, a reckless grin on his face.

Hermione fused her eyebrows in question. “Rose bushes?!” She asked incredulously, causing Harry to put a finger to his lips again to indicate silence.

Harry rolled his eyes, obviously uninterested before he pulled Hermione into closer his arms, nuzzling her neck affectionately, causing her to smile at the gesture.

“Well enough about Weasley and Snape or even Rose bushes...Let’s focus on *us* right now then, shall we? He asked, pulling back and turning Hermione around so that they were meeting each other’s gaze face to face.

However, when he saw the slightly uncomfortable look on Hermione’s eyes, he creased his eyebrows together into a frown, raising an eyebrow in question.

“Hermione, is there something you want to tell me?” He asked, looking concerned.

Hermione didn’t respond for a moment before she finally sighed and looked up to meet his eyes again, nodding very slowly and pulling away from Harry’s arms to plop herself down onto the edge of the fountain of the garden.

“Harry... It’s just... I have to get this off my chest... I uh... You know when I told you that day in the classroom about this one person who already told me that you had another date which was why I took Viktor’s offer?” She asked, her voice sounding nervous and uncertain.

Harry narrowed his eyes very carefully, slowly sitting down beside her as he nodded in suspicion. “Yeah...” He drawled, looking at her intently as she met his gaze with a sheepish smile.

“Well... That was... That was *Parvati*.” She said, giving him a half-sheepish smile, half-grimace just as Harry’s eyes flashed in wild, uncontrollable anger, his handsome features twisting into a hideous snarl.

“That *bitch*... That conniving, no good, sluttish, underhanded, dirty *bitch*! It was *her* all this time! All this fucking time it was Parvati fucking Patil! That good-for-nothing, whore, I’ll *kill* her!” Harry cursed, bolting up and attempting to run back into the castle but Hermione bolted up with him, holding him back gently.

“No, Harry, please, just let it go okay? Let *her* go... That doesn’t matter anymore anyway... We shouldn’t bother with *her*.” Hermione told him, stroking his cheek to calm the enraged Slytherin down.

“But that *bitch* caused all of this! If she hadn’t done anything, we could have prevented all this from happening! I can’t believe I asked her to be my fucking partner, that *bitch* doesn’t even deserve *Longbottom* for a partner! She deserves to be maimed and brutally dismantled!” Harry raged angrily, the anger still evident in his eyes.

Hermione couldn’t prevent a smile from breaking out onto her face but she shook her head firmly, giving him a pointed smile. “Forget her, Harry... She doesn’t even deserve to be given attention. She took her shot and failed... We shouldn’t let her get to us.” She told him gently.

“B-but, she’s a sly little whorish—”

“*Harry*, you wouldn’t want to risk being expelled for hurting another student now, do you? Another *female* student... A *Gryffindor*, as well... Think of how Prof. McGonagall might punish you, especially since she seems to be rather *fond* of you and Malfoy... And worst of all, do you want to lose *Slytherin* house points?” She asked pointedly, knowing Harry would soon give in.

Just as she suspected, Harry’s shoulders relaxed but he was still scowling darkly at the ground as Hermione helped him sit down onto the edge of the fountain again, trying to soothe his nerves.

“Forget her, Harry... She doesn’t bother me anymore... She doesn’t matter... Besides... Didn’t you say you wanted to give me something? No need to *rush* you know...” Hermione hinted, giving him a wink to divert the Slytherin’s attention away from trying to murder her housemate.

As she thought, Harry immediately broke out into a grin, forgetting all about Parvati and finally drawing Hermione's attention to the wrapped packages on the ground beside him which caused her eyes to widen in question.

"Harry... What—" Hermione didn't bother finishing her sentence as Harry took the smaller gift and placed it very gently into Hermione's palm, giving her a small but nervous smile.

"Harry, you shouldn't have done this... I didn't get you anything in return, I—"

"Hey, who said I did this to get one in return? I bought you a gift because I *wanted* to, Hermione... Now go on, open it." He whispered softly, stroking her cheek.

"Open it..." He repeated softly when Hermione just stared at him with shining eyes, obviously at a serious loss for words.

She could only nod in response before she slowly began unwrapping the beautifully adorned gift with trembling fingers, causing Harry to roll his eyes fondly at how Hermione didn't just tear the wrapper apart.

When the wrapped had finally come off, completely whole and without rips, much to Harry's amusement, Hermione's eyes widened even more when she saw a long red velvet box which looked big enough to hold a necklace.

"I think you'll find this particular gift small on the outside but slightly bigger on the inside." He told her, grinning as Hermione met his gaze with a confused look but he just urged her to open the box again.

Holding her breath, she carefully opened the lid and found herself staring into a beautiful, sparkling gold pendant in the shape of the Gryffindor lion, the lion's eyes sparkling and looked suspiciously like small diamonds catching the light.

Hermione couldn't move or react at the moment, too stunned to say anything as well as Harry took the liberty of gently taking the pendant out of the box, holding it up so that Hermione could see that it was also on a thin gold chain.

“Symbolizes the Gryffindor courage you have, Hermione... I only saw it in *you*. You’re the most beautiful, bravest and most noble girl I have ever known...” He whispered, his eyes sparkling with an unreadable emotion in them that Hermione didn’t want to assume anything about yet.

Then, with a smile, he gestured for her to turn around which Hermione shakily complied to as Harry draped the pendant over her from behind and fastened it safely around her slender neck, leaning in to place a small kiss on the skin as he did.

“H-Harry... I-I don’t know what to say... I—” She didn’t finish once more as Harry put a finger to her lips, stopping her midsentence.

“Shh... That’s not your gift yet, Hermione... That’s just the key to it...” He said, a mischievous smirk on his handsome face as he bent down and picked up the slightly larger present and handed it to her.

Hermione fused her eyebrows together, confused but nodded and this time, tore the wrapper away from the present, not wanting to prolong the surprise or to make her curiosity and excitement wait any longer.

What she saw made her heart jump painfully up and down in her chest as she shakily lifted the beautiful gold music box from her lap, inspecting it closely as she noticed that it seemed to have some kind of lock on the top in the shape of a lion pendant around her neck. Grinning knowingly, she finally looked up and managed a wry smile at the boy watching her.

“So... That’s what you meant about the ‘key’ huh?” She asked, smirking back as she took the lion pendant and pressed it onto the lock of the music box, instantly causing the box to magically open, revealing what was inside.

Hermione’s eyes, if possible, were now bulging out of their sockets when she saw the scarlet-colored inside of the music box. Inside, there appeared to be a miniature dance floor similar to the dance floor back in the Great Hall earlier and dancing around gracefully on the floor were two crystalline figures, both looking suspiciously familiar.

Then, with a jolt of shock, she realized that the crystalline figures had been magically enchanted to take the forms of how she and Harry had looked like during their own dance, both figures pressed tightly against each other and swaying softly to the music as though they were real themselves.

But that wasn't what affected her at all... The best part was probably the song that music box was emitting as the two crystalline figures dance, instantly causing a tear she had been holding back to trail down her cheek.

*"Whenever sang my songs... On the stage... On my own..."*

"Eyes on me... A music box that plays 'Eyes On Me'..." She said out loud, turning to give Harry a tearful smile, which he returned, though nervously as he anxiously twiddled his fingers.

"Do you like it?" He asked, surprising Hermione at the timidity she heard in his voice but she laughed it off, gently closing the music box once more before she hugged her former enemy as tight as she could, kissing him long and deeply on the lips.

"I'll take that as a yes..." He murmured, smiling into the kiss as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to him again, kissing her back passionately.

"Harry, you silly Slytherin prick, I *love* it... Thank you..." She whispered, pulling back and allowing Harry to see the happy sparkle in her eyes once again and for once, Harry was sure, shocked, terrified and extremely nervous of the phrase that he was about to say next.

"*I love 'you'...*" He whispered before looking away immediately so Hermione couldn't see his eyes but the Gryffindor's own eyes had suddenly widened in surprise, tears of disbelief and happiness filling them once again.

"Wh-what did you say, Harry?" She croaked out, using her free hand to tilt his gaze towards her again, looking deep into those emerald orbs to make sure the Slytherin was telling the truth but she saw that for once, there was nothing but sincerity in them.

“I—I... I meant, uh, I uh...” Harry’s eyes darted around frantically, trying to find an excuse to cover up his mistake but Hermione wasn’t about to let him go, smiling at him, her eyes shining.

*He loves me... He finally said it... He loves me...He loves ‘me’...* She thought happily, her heart pounding rapidly in her chest and her eyes watering, threatening to spill down her cheeks once again.

“Harry... I... Oh you git, look at me...” She said softly, holding his face very gently with her hands to keep him looking into her eyes, seeing fear and anxiety in the boy’s eyes as though he had been scared to admit that he loved her.

“I love *you* too...” She whispered, not pressuring him as she pulled him into a hug again, feeling happier and more content than she had ever felt before in her whole life.

Harry didn’t say anything, still shocked and afraid of what he had said as he just hugged her back in response, his trembling fingers caressing her neck gently.

He didn’t notice that behind him, Hermione still had the music box in her hand and she finally saw the inscription in the inside of the music box just above the small mirror in glittering letters.

*“My eyes will always and will only be on you...”*

“H-Happy Christmas Harry...” She stuttered, now openly crying softly onto his shoulder as she spoke the words.

“Happy Christmas... Hermione...”

**A/N:** The end... giggle JUST KIDDING! I’m sorry if this chapter was so fluffy... giggle I wanted to make it fluffy after the angst I threw at you all in the past chapter... Aso, if you guys don’t already know, the song during Harry and Hermione’s dance was none other than **Eyes On Me** of course, by **Faye Wong**, and is in the soundtrack of FF8. I suggest listening to it while reading the dance part, it helps! **PLEASE REVIEW!!**



## Chapter 24- The Unspoken Truth

AJ violently slammed the door of the empty girls' dormitories shut, tearing to her four-poster bed and burying her face deep into her pillow, finally releasing the harsh, trembling sobs from her body.

She didn't even bother changing out of her gown as she just lay sprawled on the bed, her heartbreaking, anguished cries piercing the silence of the empty room as she recalled the scene that refused to dance out of her eyes, replaying the painful scene over and over again.

*Draco... He was kissing Padma... He...* She didn't even dare to finish her own train of thought as she just hiccupped loudly and cried some more, wanting nothing more than to lock herself up in the room for a long period of time.

She didn't want to see anyone... She didn't think she could handle it if she did... She couldn't even tell Harry about what happened... He had been hoping so hard when he finally gave her and Draco his blessing that night... She didn't want to spoil his mood by telling her nothing had happened except the situation growing worse.

She couldn't believe it... She screwed up... Big time... It had all been her fault... If only she had realized her feelings for Draco sooner, this wouldn't have happened... He wouldn't have been put through such a hard time.

Maybe, just maybe, if she had told him how she felt a long time ago, she would still have him... He would still be hers...

*But was he really ever yours, AJ? You never really appreciated him so much until now that he's finally moved on from you, haven't you?* A cold, taunting voice echoed inside her head, making her heart clench even more.

It had just been so hard before to like Draco... All their lives and throughout their entire friendship, she had just grown so accustomed to always arguing with Draco and playing around with him, treating

him like another annoying older brother... She had never expected to fall for him.

And when she did, she had refused to face the feelings herself because she didn't want to change the security that was already in their friendship... She had repeatedly passed the feeling over as some sort of 'platonic love' numerous times, refusing to see the truth...

And to prove it to herself, she went and focused more on her small infatuation with Ron, somehow, using the small crush as an excuse to let it develop and to distract her from her growing feelings towards her brother's best friend...

And it had definitely worked like a charm... She had made herself completely oblivious and stupid to how Draco really cared for her, despite the way he liked to show it by annoying her any chance he got... She was a fraud... A sick, stupid, twisted fraud..

*Fraud.... Idiot... No good, worthless piece of crap...* AJ thought bitterly to herself, the tears still streaming down her face as she shakily got up and walked over to the mirror, glaring silently at her reflection.

The small amount of mascara she had applied to her eyes had now become runny thanks to her tears and her hair was now scattered all over the place, briefly reminding her of how Harry's hair had looked before Hogwarts and her face was horrible pale and dreary.

"Look at you... What does he ever see in you?? You never deserved him, Potter... Quit crying... You brought this on yourself... You dug your grave and you deserve to lie in it." She spat out harshly at her reflection, her eyes blurring up in misery.

Her reflection just stared back blankly at her, merely raising an eyebrow in response, angering her even more before she tensed up and clenched her fists together, shaking in self-loathing.

"You good-for-nothing coward!! What did you expect?! Did you really think Draco was going to wait around for you forever?! Stop staring at me like that, you deserve to rot in hell *alone!*" She screamed, pulling

her tightly clenched fist back and punching the mirror as hard as she could, breaking it instantly, the numerous shards crashing loudly to the floor.

AJ now let the loud, pained sobs out more freely, her shoulders shaking and her form trembling as barely even looked at the now painfully throbbing and scarily *deep* wound in the fist she had used to break the mirror, the blood now flowing out rapidly and spilling onto the cold dungeon floor.

Wincing in pain, she cried to herself as she leaned back down on the wall where the whole mirror used to be, sliding down it slowly until she had curled into a fetal position on the floor, sitting down and burying her face in her knees, crying loudly.

Her blood was now spilling out onto the floor, staining it a harsh, stinging red color but she didn't care at all, not even bothering to think about the pain overwhelming her as she just continued to cry against the wall softly, the hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

She barely noticed that the blood had also stained her beautiful new gown as well, smearing the emerald color of the pure fabric as she cried... She couldn't have cared less... She just wanted nothing more than to free the pain inside her so she didn't have to feel it again.

She wanted it all out of her... She wanted it all gone the first time so she wouldn't have to face it again and again whenever Draco came into her thoughts... Harry was right... Falling in love only meant risking yourself in getting hurt and he was right that she couldn't handle it...

He had been right all along... Maybe she should have listened to him and not have gotten involved with anyone at all... Then maybe she wouldn't be feeling this way right now...

*Look at me... My first attempt at so-called love and already, I can't take it... I 'am' weak and helpless... I'll never be anything else...* Maybe she 'was' too young to face all of this. Maybe now just wasn't the time. Or maybe...

*"Maybe there isn't 'ever' going to be a time meant for 'me'..."* She whispered, her words slurred and hoarse, her cheeks and her skirt wet from the tears that were still falling and her eyes so swollen it was beginning to hurt.

Removing her head from her knees and looking back down at the shards of mirror scattered all over the floor, she caught sight of her reflection again on one particularly large piece and glared hatefully at it again.

She *hated* herself... Hated her pale skin and those damn green eyes... Hated the black hair... Hated the expression on her face that exemplified the true qualities of a Slytherin... She hated everything...

Hatefully, she sneered at herself in bitter anger, rage immediately seeping through her veins again when her reflection exhibited, not who she was, but the *'Slytherin Princess'* she was forced to become.

*"Slytherin princess..."* She drawled angrily, sarcasm and unadulterated self-mockery dripping from her voice as she spoke the words.

She looked resentfully at the girl in the mirror again before finally, she grabbed the largest shard of the broken mirror, immediately scratching herself in the process on the palm, but she ignored it and hurled the shard of mirror towards the wall. She watched, feeling a bit satisfied as the glass shattered into a dozen more tiny pieces, giving her a weird feeling of contentment and calm.

She didn't want to be that weak, helpless and protected *'princess'* anymore... She wanted to be stronger than that, No, she *would* be stronger than that... She wouldn't succumb to always doing what other people would expect her to do...

Now, whenever she felt something, she would say it out loud and whenever she believed in something, she would fight for it... She couldn't care less about what the other Slytherins would say anymore... She didn't want to be a part of the crowd anymore... She wanted to be independent...

This alone has proven she hadn't been ready when she had her heart broken... She didn't want that again... She would move on... She couldn't cling onto Draco forever... He deserved to be free from all the pain she had caused him... He deserved someone better than her...

Someone who wasn't as stupid and worthless as she was... No, he needed someone strong and independent... Someone like...

AJ wrenched her eyes shut as another tear rolled down her cheek, trailing an already drying up path an earlier tear had made earlier before falling to the floor in the small pool of blood already forming beside her.

*Padma Patil...* She thought, holding back a wince of pain as her heart constricted painfully in her chest as though it had disagreed with her, a small ounce of hope still stubbornly remaining within her soul.

*No... I don't have a right to hope anymore anyway... Maybe Ron and I could actually work out a relationship somehow... Maybe I'll find myself growing to love him after some getting used to...* She reasoned half-heartedly to herself.

But somehow, she knew that deep inside, no matter what she kept trying to tell herself, her heart would always want no one else but the smirking, silver-haired boy she had grown to love ever since she met him three years ago in Madam Malkin's robe shop...

*Nothing*, no matter how much time, distance, complications and even how many new people were put in between them, even if she *did* manage to grow to love them, her first and only true love would always be Draco...

*"Draco..."* She whispered to herself, finally opening her eyes again to reveal glistening green orbs staring off into space almost as though she was caught in a trance, unblinking and unmoving.

*Well, you wanted it this to happen didn't you? You said to yourself over and over again that you wanted to go with Ron and you wanted 'him' to be your first love, not Draco... Well congratulations... Another*

cold sarcastic voice snapped cruelly inside her, causing her to wince in shame.

"I got my wish then..." She said out loud to herself, managing a wry, mocking smile at herself as she remembered Blaise's words to her earlier that night when they had danced, the full meaning of the words hitting her right in the gut.

*"The one person who can really say he loves you... Is the one who waits patiently behind you for you to love him back..."*

*I spent all my time and energy, determined to lose my feelings for Draco by pursuing by obsession with Ron that I didn't realize that the one I was avoiding was the one I loved after all this time... I was just so intent on proving my own point to myself... She thought on, all her self-disgust pouring out of her completely.*

*Blaise was right all along... I just wanted an excuse to run away in fear of starting a relationship with Draco that I pretended to like Ron... Only I never did.. At least, not in the way I expected...She thought sadly.*

*I was just scared... I was 'terrified' of the idea of having a relationship with Draco or with the one I really did love... because then I might end up hurting myself, our friendship but most of all... 'him'... She thought desperately, arguing with herself.*

*And to sum it all up... I tried as best as I could to avoid loving him because I 'did' love him... I didn't want to face it... I'm a bloody coward...A marking of a real Slytherin then... She thought sarcastically.*

*Which brings me back to my original statement..."I. Screwed. Up."* She concluded out loud flatly, turning away again. Well no more... She wouldn't be scared anymore... She wasn't... *I'll never make that mistake again... I can't... I won't be weak and pathetic...*

*I won't be the Slytherin they all expect me to be because frankly, I don't want to be a Slytherin anymore! I have never acted like anything close to a bloody Slytherin my whole bloody life! I can't keep pretending like this! And I will not hide behind my fellow Slytherins*

*either... I can take care of myself...* She vowed silently, noticing that her eyes were blurring again but she didn't even have the strength to stop them anymore.

*The sorting hat was right... My weakness 'does' overpower my strength...I 'do' hide behind a mask and I 'do' hide my true self... Well not anymore... It's time to find my own damn path... I can... I won't hide anymore... I've had enough of hiding...It had already cost me the boy I loved... I...—*"

**"I WANT OUT!! I WANT OUT NOW!!"** AJ screamed out loud, her angry, determined and yet, scarily shaky hoarse voice echoing in the entire room and seeming to bounce back at her forcefully.

"Very good.... Ms. Potter..." A voice seemed to hiss very faintly in her ear, causing AJ's eyes to widen suddenly in fear as she whirled around, desperately trying to find the source of the soft voice but she was the only one in the room.

"Wh-who's there?" She asked nervously, the shaky tone of her voice betraying the calmness she willed herself to have.

Silence dawned upon the entire room once again, confusing her for a moment before her attention was finally drawn to the large pool of blood on the floor from her bleeding hand, finally registering the faint, dizzy feeling that was now overwhelming her from the extreme loss of blood.

Now dizzy and weak, her face pale from the rapid blood loss, she tried to hoist her weak body up from the floor and managed to catch her reflection once again in the opposite mirror of the room, momentarily surprising herself in what she saw.

She still saw the same girl of course... The same long raven black hair and the same emerald green eyes... The same lips and chin and definitely the same delicate, yet extremely pallid face but...

Her eyes now seemed more guarded somehow... Stronger and with a newly acquired fierceness she had never seen before... She didn't all look all the frail and innocent now...In fact, she looked stronger... Stronger and more determined of herself.

Her facial expression wasn't as soft and delicate... As *frail* as it used to be but was now radiating with confidence and a strange sense of bravery she had definitely *never* seen before...

There was no more malice or mockery present in her expression or in her eyes... There was no more of that ever present arrogance and pride... No more harsh, impending and egoistic superiority or aura of arrogance and contempt...

Instead, she saw nothing but her true self looking back at her... Her true self when she was with Harry or when she was with... With *Draco*... Nothing but truth, love, courage and loyalty shining in her eyes... She couldn't even understand how such a small change could transform her entire appearance instantly.

A strange feeling of calmness swept over her as she allowed the corner of her lips to quirk very weakly into something that resembled a ghost of a smile but it soon faded away instantly when she caught sight of the dark figure behind her from the mirror's reflection, causing her to whip around in shock.

"Who's there?!" She asked in panic, her voice shaky and raspy and her vision still slightly blurred from the tears but the dark shadowy figure just chuckled, his face hidden in the darkness of the dungeon.

AJ's eyes widened in panic as she recognized the figure in front of her when he had stepped into the light, exposing the gray, frizzy hair and the steady though piercing magical eye in one eye socket.

"I'm just a messenger... Ms. Potter..." The man hissed darkly, an evil smile on his face as he held out his right hand where he grasped a small flask of dark red liquid almost as dark as the blood flowing out from AJ's bleeding fist.

"Wha-What—"

"*Drink it.* It'll make everything easier, Ms. Potter... That way, you could die a fast and painless death and still keep your dignity in making it look like a suicide... Now...*Drink!*" He hissed again, his voice sounding strangely like a snake's as he thrust the flask at her.



AJ just stepped back, her entire form shaking and trembling with fear as she promptly tried to send any kind of desperate message to her twin by the special link between them that had saved them numerous times before but she seemed to be drawing a blank.

*“Drink it!”* The man yelled this time as he finally trapped AJ into the corner, his wand clutched tightly in his fist as though he was just waiting for the opportunity to kill her with a single spell.

AJ’s eyes widened as she finally backed into the end of the room, her back pressing in desperation against the cold wall as she tried to think of any possible way to escape the room, her eyes darting from side to side in panic.

*“Help!! Harry!! Draco!!”* She screamed loudly but the man just laughed out loud, his normal eye glinting in pure, evil sadistic pleasure, his gaunt lips twisting into an ugly snarl.

*“It’s no use my dear... Wasn’t it you who placed the silencing charm on the room? Now, if you know what’s good for you, *drink from the flask* or I would gladly more so enjoy hitting you with one single killing curse...”* The man drawled lazily, shoving the flask of liquid towards her again.

AJ flinched away, her heart hammering in her chest in absolute fear she eyed the crazy wizard in front of her, knowing full well that he could easily kill her in the exact way he was threatening to do so.

*“Wh-why are you doing this?! Why...you?”* She asked angrily but the confusion in her voice hid it well and the man found it extremely amusing somehow, laughing hysterically at her question.

*“I am *not* who you think I am... But you needn’t know who I am, Ms. Potter... All will be explained in the afterlife...”* He said, a scary note of malice in his voice before he stepped forward and snatched AJ by her bleeding hand, causing the girl to cry out in pain again.

*“D-Dumbledore will know about this, wh-whoever you are!! You can k-kill me but if you think you can kill Harry, you’re—”*

*“SHUT UP CHILD AND DRINK IT!”* He boomed angrily but AJ shoved him away in panic, her eyes wide with terror as she ducked to avoid him and tried to wring away from his grasp but the man caught her by the arm again, shoving her onto the floor.

“Avada—”

*“No!!”* She screamed, using the little amount of strength she had left to shove him away again, causing the wizard to stumble in surprise as she scrambled to get up and ran towards the door.

*“Somebody help me!!”* She screamed again, furiously trying to yank open the deadly locked door, tears of fear and pain blurring her vision but before she could, the man had raised his wand again and had directed it at the defenseless, crying girl in front of him.

*“IMPERIO!”* He yelled out angrily, wiping the trickle of blood from his chin as the raven-haired Slytherin instantly stumbled onto the floor, her eyes wide and cold as though she had gone into a deep state of trance.

*Drink the potion now...* He ordered silently, watching in evil amusement as the girl promptly stood up again, stiffly walking over to him, taking the flask from his hand, drinking the blood red easily in a single swig.

The man’s lips formed itself into a smile of hatred as he watched the liquid slowly disappear into the girl’s red lips, leaving the flask completely empty and spotless of the potion.

As soon as every single drop of potion had been taken in, AJ coughed repeatedly, feeling the harsh liquid tingling painfully down her throat and churning something in her stomach.

*“Pleasant dreams, Ms. Potter...”* The man drawled sarcastically, laughing like a crazed maniac as the glass flask of liquid slipped from AJ’s pale hands, crashing onto the floor noisily and the girl’s eyes rolled over, her frail, weak body going limp and crumpling to the floor.

“Sleep well...” The man whispered, smiling sinisterly as he hovered over her, using his feet to step on her long skirt to keep her from trying to get up once again.

“*Finite Incantatem.*” He muttered, ending the Imperius curse as he flicked his wand over the girl’s now convulsing form on the ground while she tried to rid herself of the potion she had just ingested.

“Someone help me, *please!!*” She screamed again but her voice came out as a forced hoarse whisper, her throat dry and tight as she trembled again, feeling the potion slip through her veins and spread through her body.

The man, Prof. Moody, just cackled again, a cold, uncharacteristic smile on his face as he briefly looked up at the ceiling, a wild, scarily ecstatic smile on his face.

“I have done as you said, Master... One Potter twin down... One more to go... Then their threat to you will be no more...” He whispered, sneering down as AJ looked up at him in shock and realization.

“Oh... And one more thing...” He gave another evil smile before flicking his wand over her once more, immediately causing the wound on her hand to magically lengthen to reach her wrist and deepen into her skin painfully.

AJ cried out loud at the throbbing of the wound now as more blood began to rush out freely, the wound now dangerously deep, much to the man’s sick pleasure at the sight.

“Farewell, little *Slytherin...*” He said, chuckling again before he strode out of the dungeon, slamming the door violently shut behind him and locking it once again, leaving AJ alone in the room with the effects of the potion slowly creeping into her veins.

Slowly, she tried taking in a deep breath of air but just as she did, she stumbled back onto the cold floor, gasping as she now realized how weak her blood-lacking body had become.

Winning in difficulty, she opened her mouth to call out for help but before she did, she felt a sharp burning on her shoulder, causing her

to fall down on the blood-stained floor and writhe with excruciating pain, her cry of help coming out as a scream of pain.

The pain intensified as she writhed in pain on the floor again, screaming and wrenching her eyes shut. She tried to concentrate on making the pain go away but it didn't seem to be working at all.

*P-Prof... Moody... He works for V-V-Voldemort... I... I h-have to tell...Harry...* She thought as she finally allowed her consciousness to lose itself, shutting her eyes and collapsing onto the floor, her weak, frail and bleeding body standing out easily like snow on the cold and dark dungeons floor.

The serpent birthmark that had once appeared on the skin behind her shoulder was now visibly gone as though it had been erased and in its place, a stretch of a harsh, red burn in which a mere shadow of a new symbol had formed, still too faint to make out properly as though it had barely begun to form itself at all...

*H-help... Harry...* She thought desperately, trying to make some kind of mental message to her twin somehow as they always managed to do so before, using the little amount of energy she had left to touch the scar on her forehead.

*Draco...*

That last thought was all it took before her consciousness drained out of her entirely and she lapsed out into complete and utter darkness, her hand falling onto the floor in the pool of blood, cold and unmoving.

Harry gasped out loud in sudden pain, snapping his hand up to his scar on his forehead and causing him to stop abruptly in the middle of the corridor where he was headed off to the prefect's bathroom, egg in one hand, invisibility cloak and marauders map in the other.

Eyes clenched shut, he tried to will the stinging pain away, running his fingers over the lightning scar as he tried to make out what his scar was trying to indicate to him at that very moment.

*Surely Voldemort couldn't be anywhere nearby could he?* He thought, looking around the empty corridor again, checking the marauders map in his hand to make sure no one was there.

From the map, he could see that most of the students were in their rooms already and the teachers were in their respective office except for Prof. Snape, who was roaming around somewhere in the dungeons.

Shrugging the pain off, Harry set off again, heading for the Prefect's bathroom while whistling to himself, a wide smile on his face as he was whistling the tune of 'Eyes On Me', his newly acquired favorite song.

He couldn't believe he could actually feel this way... It was almost like he had won the Quidditch cup all over again this year... And it was much stronger than that... Like he could actually float on air and fly even without his Firebolt.

And as stupid as he knew he must be feeling and sounding like, he *liked* this feeling... he actually liked being in love like this... No wonder all those fools have stayed together so long.

Still whistling, he rounded the corner and casually strolled over to the entrance of the Prefect's bathroom in front of 'Boris the Bewildered', briefly smiling to himself again when he recalled that this was exactly where he and Hermione had met once a couple of weeks ago.

*Get a grip on yourself, Potter! Stop thinking about Hermione!* A voice snapped in irritation inside his head, causing Harry to cringe at his own voice's annoyance before sighing and muttering the password, slipping into the beautiful, magnificent bathroom.

After he had met up with Hermione that night, he found that he couldn't seem to muster up any feeling to help him get to sleep so he just decided to try out Diggory's so called hint about the golden egg, wanting to check whether it was worth trying out or not.

As he stepped into the room, he briefly heard the faint, excited giggle of the mermaid portrait again at the sight of the handsome Slytherin,

once again beginning to show off and flash her fins, giving him a dazzling smile.

Harry didn't even look at her, setting his stuff down onto the floor before muttering a complex locking charm on the door, making sure no one could get in just as what had happened with Parvati before.

*Parvati...* Harry growled to himself, his thoughts focusing angrily on the Gryffindor girl for a minute, wanting nothing more than to throw aside his impending 'respect for women' and show the girl exactly *why* the school feared him but he knew Hermione wouldn't appreciate him doing that at all.

Sighing again, he began undressing himself slowly, still ignoring the gasps issuing from the mermaid's mouth as he stripped himself right then and there before turning on the faucets of the bathtub, waiting until it was filled with bubbles and climbing in.

His eyelids fluttered close in relaxation as he leaned back and drenched his hair into the warm, soothing water, feeling the enchanted water loosen his tense muscles and give him a strong sense of calmness.

*I wonder what that prick Diggory meant... Surely, I don't feel any sort of idea coming to me except to sleep.* Harry thought irritably, running a soapy hand through his hair slowly.

"Ooh.. I'd try putting the egg into the water if I were you." A high, giggly voice said, immediately causing Harry's eyes to bolt open and glare straight ahead into the transparent form of Moaning Myrtle, an obsessive and extremely depressed ghost he and Draco had accidentally stumbled on in their second year.

Harry didn't make a move to cover himself, just staring back lazily at the ghost as she goggled at him, amusing the Slytherin when he thought he caught a faint tone of red on her pale white cheeks.

"Well? Aren't you going to scream for me to get out and demand for privacy? Most boys who are taking baths when I come in here do that you know." She said, giggling again.

Harry didn't even flinch, just shrugging and continuing to massage his tense shoulder, yawning loudly to indicate his boredom.

"Why bother? I have nothing to be ashamed of anyway... Though I'm thinking you already know that, don't you Myrtle?" He asked slyly, giving the embarrassed ghost a smirk as she seemed to widen her eyes, letting out a squeak.

"N-no! I closed my eyes when you came in! I didn't see anything!" Moaning Myrtle protested, looking high embarrassed now as she tried to cover up her eyes but Harry just chuckled in amusement, the sexy sound seeming to have its desired effect on both Myrtle *and* the gawking mermaid in the portrait.

"Sure... You did..." Harry drawled easily, using a handful of water to run it through his hair again, slicking back the strands from his face and briefly making him look a lot like Draco with a matching smirk on his face.

"Harry... How come you don't come to visit me in the bathroom anymore?" Myrtle asked sadly, looking at Harry reproachfully as she tried to float closer to the bathing Slytherin, obviously demanding an answer.

"Myrtle, that's a *girl's* bathroom for Merlin's sake..." Harry snapped in irritation, rolling his eyes at her whiny tone of voice.

"Well, not many people seemed to care enough... These three Gryffindors seemed to be there all the time before and you and your friend seemed to come there occasionally." She said, sniffing.

Harry briefly wondered who those three Gryffindors were and what business they had in not only a girl's but *Moaning Myrtle's* bathroom but he shrugged it off, deciding he didn't care.

He and Draco had only been there about once or twice by accident, although the minute Moaning Myrtle had seen Harry, her sobs seemed to subside every time and she would smile and blush and giggle at him, much to Draco's amusement.

“Anyway, I’d try putting the egg *in* the water if I were you... That’s what Diggory did when he was here, although I didn’t show myself to him... I’d have freaked him out somehow...” Moaning Myrtle said, giggling again.

Harry rolled his eyes, sighing in exasperation as he briefly wondered just how *he* could be the lucky chosen one that Moaning Myrtle just had to show herself to.

Grinning slyly to himself, he got up from the bath tub and strode over to where he had put the egg, causing Myrtle to gasp and blush again, trying to cover her eyes stupidly with the fingers on her hand spread wide apart for her to see easily.

Harry held back another laugh as he just lazily strolled back to the tub, getting back in and putting the egg deep into the water, waiting for it to sink down to the bottom of the tub.

As soon as Myrtle had calmed herself, she turned to look at Harry again, who was now examining the egg under the water, his eyebrows fused together in confusion. “*Now*, what am I supposed to do with this thing?” He asked in irritation, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, go on and open it under water! I thought you were smarter than that.” Moaning Myrtle said, looking very much amused and enjoying every minute of getting to help the popular Slytherin with the clue.

Harry growled something under his breath but obliged, propping the egg apart and watching as the harsh screaming seemed to have been muffled by the water, causing him to narrow his eyes in suspicion.

Eyebrows still fused together, he lowered himself into the water before Moaning Myrtle could utter anything else, finally hearing the hidden song the egg was singing underwater.

*“Come seek us where our voices sound, we cannot sing above the ground.. And while you’re searching, ponder this, we’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss... An hour long you’ll have to look, and to recover what we took, but past an hour—the prospect’s black, too late it’s gone, it won’t come back.”*



Frowning, Harry pulled himself out of the water and thought to himself, the song's lyrics repeating over and over again in his head as he did...

*Sorely miss? They'll take what I sorely miss? Creatures who can't sing above the ground?* Harry thought, thinking deeply as both Myrtle and the mermaid in the portrait watched him with adoring eyes, taking in his adorably confused look.

*People who can't use their voices above the ground... Above the ground... So...* "They're either underground or underwater creatures..." He muttered to himself, scratching his head as Myrtle beamed at him cheerfully.

Harry looked at her suspiciously for a second, slightly amazed at how cheerful Myrtle was acting despite how sad and miserable she had always been to Harry whenever they saw her in the bathroom.

It seemed seeing him making a complete fool of himself in front of her was amusing her greatly and it was really beginning to piss him off in irritation.

"Hmm... Underwater creatures... I reckon it's *underwater* since I had to put the egg under water to hear the song... But... what could be in the lake here besides that giant squid?" He thought out loud to Myrtle, who was now smiling cheekily at him.

"Ooh.. So you're *not* all looks after all, Potter... It took Diggory much longer than that..." She said to him but Harry ignored her, scratching his head again as he lay back down on the tub in thought.

"Hmm... I doubt there is anything living underwater with a human voice... Except... Maybe... No..." Harry's eyes widened in realization as he snapped his head up and looked intently at the mermaid in the portrait, who giggled coyly and flashed her fins again when she saw him looking at her.

"*Merpeople!* Myrtle, would there by any chance be *merpeople* in the lake?" He asked her suddenly, his eyes lighting up in understanding.

Moaning Myrtle gawked at him, her eyes shining in adoration once again behind those horn-rimmed glasses. "Ooh... That was fast, Harry! Diggory spent hours in that tub thinking about that..." She said, blushing.

Harry held back the harsh reply he longed to snap at her and turned away, shutting the egg once more and taking it out of the tub.

"So... The second task has got something to do with going into the lake and going against merpeople to... retrieve something I'll miss?? But..." Harry stopped abruptly, panicking for a minute as he thought of he had almost drowned once before when Dudley had shoved him into a lake when he was three.

"How the bloody hell am I supposed to *breathe* in there?!" He snapped out loud to no one in particular, immediately causing the glowing smile on Myrtle's face to disappear and her eyes to fill with tears.

"You tactless jerk!" She spat out, sniffing loudly as she turned her back towards him but Harry just rolled his eyes in irritation, trying very hard not to lose his temper.

"Oh... I forgot... You're dead... You *don't* breathe..." He said coldly, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he shot a sneer at her making Myrtle cry harder, sniffing and bawling to herself.

"Oh sure, it's so easy to forget the Myrtle's dead! No one missed me when I was alive since it took them hours to find my body! I remember when Olive Hornby—" Her voice trailed on and on but Harry was no longer listening, finding himself immersed in his own thoughts yet again.

*We've taken what you'll sorely miss...Now what did the song mean by that?* He thought, trying to think of the thing he had which they might be considering to take based on its value to him.

*What are they taking? My Firebolt? My new pocketwatch? My dad's invisibility cloak?* He thought silently as Myrtle droned on and on, not even noticing that he was no longer listening to her, continuing to spill out her problem.

“Er... Right, Myrtle...Thanks for the help.. You might want to close your eyes again.” Harry forewarned, smirking to himself before getting up again to the amusing sounds of the mermaid’s gasp and giggle, wrapping a green fluffy towel around his waist.

Myrtle shook her head to clear the rather tempting image away before sniffing and floating over to where Harry was once again slipping into his clothes, obviously taking his time as he did.

“Will you come to visit me again in my bathroom sometime?” She asked sadly, watching as Harry whispered a spell to automatically brush and tame his hair and readjusted his serpent earring on his ear.

“I’ll see, Myrtle...” He answered briskly, smirking to himself and knowing full well that he would rather eat dead slugs than to ever go near that wretched bathroom again.

He watched as Myrtle nodded sadly again and zoomed back up the tap, much to Harry’s disgust before he rolled his eyes and adjusted his clothes again, flicking his wand at the door to remove the locking charm.

Yawning, he slid out the door and hastily slipped the invisibility cloak on himself, making his way back to the dungeons to get a good night’s sleep and keeping his eyes trained on the marauder’s map as he did. Just as he was about to look away, something in the far left corner caught his eye, causing them to widen in surprise.

Right where Snape’s office was, he saw another dot moving around hastily but what truly shocked him more was that it wasn’t Prof. Snape that the dot was labeled as but it was ‘*Bartemius Crouch*’, who was supposedly one of the judges for the TriWizard tournament.

*Didn’t Percy Weasley say that Crouch was too ill to come to Hogwarts for the tournament? What is he doing in Prof. Snape’s office at two in the morning?* He thought, frowning as he watched the dot on the map.

Harry paused in a certain corridor, having an inner debate with himself whether he was going to risk being caught and watch what

Crouch was up to or go back to the Slytherin dorms like a good little student.

Smirking, he promptly headed over to his head of house's office, a reckless grin on his face as he did. "Since when have I ever been a 'good little student'?" He murmured to himself.

He began making his way towards the office, checking to make sure he wasn't about to run into anyone in the corridor as he passed. Looking at the map intently, he caught sight of 'Parvati Patil' running along outside the grounds, obviously still in her dog form, causing Harry to laugh sadistically to himself.

Still laughing over the image, he failed to notice the trick step on the stairs that Longbottom always managed to step into, causing him to let out a curse in surprise as his leg sank immediately into the step and caused him to stumble sloppily.

Panicking, he struggled to keep a firm hold on the egg in his arms but before he could, it had slipped out and crashed very noisily to the floor, splitting apart and screeching loudly in the corridors.

Harry gasped as the invisibility cloak almost slipped off him, causing him to snatch at it but in the process, the marauders map had slipped from his grasp and slid far away from him onto the lower stair steps where he could no longer reach it from where he was.

Now absolutely desperate, he yanked the invisibility cloak tight over himself, biting his lip as he waited for Filch to storm the corridor, obviously searching for the source of the horrible wailing.

"PEEVES!"

Harry groaned inwardly and shut his eyes as Filch, exactly as he had predicted, came storming through the empty corridor, obviously enraged by the noise the horrible egg was making.

"What the—This is a TriWizard Tournament clue from a champion! Merlin's beard, Peeves! You're stealing from students now! Wait till I get my hands on you!" Filch raged, searching around wildly as Harry heard the egg being shut and the screaming stopping abruptly.

Holding his breath, he watched as Filch headed up the stairs towards him, an angry searching look in his eyes as Mrs. Norris looked intently at Harry from behind him, which Harry returned with a growl, briefly wondering if she could see through invisibility cloaks.

“Stupid cat...” He muttered under his breath, growling as Filch climbed up some more, causing Harry to panic again and try desperately to pull his leg out of the steps, fearing that Filch was going to walk right into him any second.

“Filch? What on earth is all the noise about?!” A familiar, drawling voice asked, causing Harry to sigh in obvious relief when he saw Prof. Snape, clad in only his gray nightshirt and looking at Peeves in irritation.

“It’s Peeves, professor! He has stolen from a student and he has been making all this noise!” Filch declared as he climbed back down the stairs, much to Harry’s relief, as he watched Snape look at Filch suspiciously.

“Peeves? No, no.. Peeves couldn’t have gotten into my office... I heard that wretched egg’s horrible wailing so I came out to investigate but I then saw that someone was obviously tampering around in my office...” Snape snapped at him, looking irritated.

“But Peeves couldn’t have—”

“I *know* he couldn’t have gotten into my office, you dunderhead! Don’t you think I seal my office with complex spells?! No why don’t you come with me, we must find that wretched intruder!” Snape barked, looking up the staircase right through Harry then down the corridor.

“Of course, Professor but see... This might be the only chance for me to get Peeves thrown out of the castle for the act of stealing—”

“I could not care *less* about Peeves right now! My office has been infiltrated by someone and I have to find out who—”

Snape stopped suddenly when he heard Moody’s loud clunking footsteps behind him, strangely coming from the Slytherin dungeons but he didn’t seem to notice as he whirled around and to the wizard

he had guessed clad in a pair of long dark robes, looking at the scene curiously.

“What is this, a pajama party?” He asked dryly, looking around in slight amusement at both Snape and Filch.

“Prof. Snape and I had heard noises, Professor so we came out to investigate but see, Prof. Snape had discovered that someone had broken into his office—”

“Shut up, Filch!” Snape hissed at him dangerously, his jet-black eyes glittering in malice at the stunned caretaker.

Moody looked around and glanced up the stairs, coming to rest on the marauder’s map first before finally resting on Harry, which, to Harry’s sudden dread, indicated that Moody’s magical eye could obviously see him there.

For a moment, Moody stood there with his mouth open, stunned, before he closed it again hastily, meeting Harry’s panicked eyes before looking back calmly at Snape.

“Someone broke into your office, Snape? Who would want to break into your office during this time of night?” He asked knowingly, trying to breach the subject away, much to Harry’s surprise.

“Well obviously a *student*, professor. I daresay it would probably be a Gryffindor roaming around late at night... A lot of students would love the opportunity to steal potion ingredients to make illegal potions... Most of them would be Love Potions, no doubt... Silly teenagers...” Snape drawled easily, sneering at Moody.

“So that would mean you’re hiding something in your office then, huh Snape?” Moody asked suddenly, his eyes glinting in suspicion.

Snape’s face twisted into an angry snarl, his eyes flashing dangerously at the other wizard in front of him. “I am hiding *nothing*, Moody... You have searched my office countless times before already.” He replied slowly, controlling the rage in his voice.

“Well, I *am* an auror, Snape... I have to search your office to see if—”

"I'll have you know, Moody, that what was stolen from my office were two very dangerous materials indeed! One was my *Draught of Endless Sleep Potion* and the other was the gillyweed I had stored in my cupboard! No one else could find uses for those materials except students!" Snape barked, looking angry at the accusation.

Both of Moody's eyes now riveted almost comically at Snape, his normal eye widening in shock and a strange twinge of fear. "Y-you mean... The one that was stolen was the '*Draught of Endless Sleep*' potion? Not the killing potion?" He asked nervously, biting his lip in anxiety.

Snape's eyes narrowed suspiciously at him as he raised an eyebrow at the tone of Moody's voice, knowing full well that the Auror definitely knew something he didn't know.

"Of course not, Moody. You think I would display a potion like that ever so freely in my office where students could easily steal it from me?? Though, why would you ask such a thing like that? Do you... Wish to tell me something, Professor?" Snape asked slowly, his eyes glinting in obvious suspicion.

But Moody's facial expression had easily turned back to normal as he hastily tried to wipe the blood from his hands in the inside of his robes, not wanting Snape to see him covered in blood without an appropriate wound for such blood loss.

"Certainly not, Professor... Although... I am thinking... That perhaps you should be telling *me* something... After all... What kind of professor would be hiding such potions like the *Draught of Endless Sleep* in his office... Surely you don't *need* it for anything..." Moody drawled easily, giving Snape a knowing smirk.

Snape's face turned ashen as he sputtered in rage, looking at Moody as though the other man had just transfigured himself into a new kind of creature he had never seen before.

"How dare you... As you already know, Moody... Dumbledore trusts me and I find it really hard to believe that he would allow you to question me like that." Snape spat out coldly, his gaze unwavering.

Harry watched the tension fly between the two enraged men, confused and curious at the same time what they could possibly be talking about. *Could this have anything to do with what Karkaroff was showing Snape on his arm before?* He asked himself but he shrugged it off, listening to the conversation once again.

“Well, Dumbledore has always been known to give second chances... I however, refuse to believe that *certain* marks could ever be removed... especially if they have been burned into you *for life*...” Moody hissed darkly, giving Snape a cold sneer.

Harry watched in confusion again as Prof. Snape seemed to pale immensely at the other man’s words, wincing in pain and suddenly grabbing at his left arm with his right hand as though it had suddenly stung for no apparent reason.

Moody laughed at him, his eyes glinting strangely before he smirked at Snape’s wince of pain, looking very much amused at the other wizard.

“Go back to bed, Snape... You shouldn’t be out in the corridors at night... Very suspicious indeed... You’ve dropped something by the way...” He said, using his wand to summon the marauder’s map to him and grabbing it in his hands.

Prof. Snape saw the piece of parchment fly into Moody’s grasp, his eyes widening for a split second as he recognized it as Harry’s before he tried to snatch it from the air before Moody could reach it but it was too late.

“Moody, would you mind handing that over to me?” Snape asked calmly, glaring at Moody as the other wizard seemed to be staring at the map in strange surprise and astonishment, his magical eye whirring.

“My mistake, Severus... it seems to belong to someone else.” He answered calmly, casually folding the map back up and tucking it into his pocket before returning Snape’s venomous glare.



Looking over at Harry, Moody seemed to put two and two together, glancing at the egg, the map again, he let out a small smile to himself, his eyes glittering suspiciously.

However, Snape seemed to be thinking the same thing as he looked back at the egg and map, realization finally dawning into his eyes as he did.

“Potter...” He said out loud, looking at the empty staircase where Harry was standing, hidden by the invisibility cloak before looking back at the egg on the ground and the map in Moody’s hands, his eyes widening curiously.

“That is Mr. Potter’s parchment... May I have it back then, Moody? The boy is after all in my house and I would take it upon myself to return it to him... I take it that the egg is his as well... Not to worry, I will see to it that I lecture him about prowling the school at night.” Snape said slowly, reaching out for the parchment but Moody held it away, looking grimly at him.

“Is that so, Prof. Snape? Well then would you also take the liberty in telling Mr. Potter...” He looked directly at Harry for a second. “That I would like to borrow his map for a short span of time... surely you could do that, right?” He asked slowly.

“I do not think so, Moody! You had best ask the boy for yourself! As head of his house, I have a responsibility to make sure—”

“Really now? Got Potter’s best interest at heart now do you? Very interesting... Especially since the boy’s father was the one who stole your—”

“Shut *up*, Moody!” Snape yelled dangerously, interrupting his train of thought as he tried to snatch the parchment again but Moody held it out of his reach, smirking.

“Aha... I see now.. Severus... You ‘*take it upon yourself*’ to watch over the Potters because... They remind you of *her*... don’t they? Though they are still James’ children, they still have a bit of ‘her’ inside them...And you feel as though you owe it to *her* to protect them after everything you’ve done because of your bitterness...”

Moody whispered to him so that Harry couldn't hear what he was saying.

Snape paled again, his eyes clouding over in painful memories as he found the meaning behind Moody's words, causing him to flinch back and look away, his face so pale now that it was nearly glowing in the light.

Moody seemed to smile as Snape turned to stare off into space, remembering her last painful words to him the night she... the night she had left him for another...

*"I fell in love with him, Severus... I know I promised that I would give you my answer when the right time came but it never did for us... I never felt the same way for you... I'm sorry... You're still my best friend but... I 'love' him..."*

"Very well then... I'd be glad to tell Mr. Potter that you have his parchment with you for the meantime. I think I'll go now..." Snape said curtly, suddenly blinking and drawing his own attention away from the painful memory.

"Good night then, Severus..." Moody drawled slowly, a hint of amusement in his voice as Snape headed back to his office, his form tense and uncomfortable before he stopped abruptly, looking up at where Harry was still trapped and watching in confusion.

"If anyone should know what's good for them... They had best come into my office tonight..." He muttered loudly to himself but Harry knew that Snape was addressing *him*, even though the professor had no idea where he was.

As soon as Snape was gone, Filch handed the egg over to Moody and began to walk away too, muttering to himself about how he was going to tell Dumbledore about Peeves in the morning.

Harry sighed in relief as he was left alone with Moody, who looked at him questioningly as he headed up the stairs toward him, both his eyes studying him intently as Harry thought he saw a strange glint in the older man's normal eye.

“Why didn’t you report me to Dumbledore?” Harry asked sharply as Moody offered a hand to help him up, which Harry only glared at in suspicion but accepted nevertheless.

“Because... I never did have much respect for such silly school rules about not patrolling around late at night... I take it the only reason you’re still awake is because you were solving this clue.” He said easily, handing Harry back the egg when he was finally out of the trick step.

Harry pulled his hand back away and immediately winced, seeing the pale skin covered in blood as Moody seemed to stiffen in panic, turning guarded, hurried eyes towards him.

“Uh, I accidentally cut myself earlier while chopping up some ingredients for an vitality potion I was taking.. Can’t have too much energy at this old age.” He said hastily, coughing and hiding his hand away from the raven-haired Slytherin.

Harry didn’t respond, examining his now blood-stained hand suspiciously and flicking his gaze back up at Moody, who was now surprisingly shifting around in unease as though he was uncomfortable about something.

“Well? What’s the matter, Potter? You’re acting like you’ve never seen blood before!” Moody quipped, chuckling to himself and clapping Harry hard on the back, causing him to wince in annoyance, his features creasing into a scowl.

Now wiping his bloody hand on his clothes, he turned to look at Moody again, who was now eyeing him in something somewhat resembling loathing and malevolence which Harry gladly returned.

“Seems we have something in common, eh Potter?” He growled, smirking at the boy in front of him.

Harry nodded but refused to say anything, taking the golden egg and dusting his robes in disdain, highly annoyed at himself for screwing up with such a clumsy, unsophisticated blunder.

“Still don’t like me much, do you, Potter?” Moody asked in amusement, his magical eye whirring to look intently at Harry, who glared back at him in response, not denying it.

“I never did have much respect for you after what you did to my best friend.” He answered truthfully in resentment but Moody just laughed, looking highly amused.

“Ah... Ever the proud and loyal Slytherin... True and highly loyal to his comrades.... I like that Potter... Very respectable... Slytherins have indeed always had this tight bond towards each other.” He commented, nodding.

Harry didn’t answer, still looking very cautiously at him in suspicion but Moody seemed to wave it off, glancing at him in question. “Though, what I did to Mr. Malfoy was to *him* alone. It did not involve *you*.” He pointed out.

“Draco is like brother to me *and* he’s a fellow Slytherin.. I’m sure you’ve heard of the saying a sin to a Slytherin is a sin to all of that house.” He answered sneeringly, raising an eyebrow.

Moody didn’t flinch but nodded, still looking at him intently, a strange, scary look in his eye. “I see...”

Harry didn’t talk about the subject further, folding the invisibility cloak and draping it over his arm, looking back at the man in question. “Why is it that your magical eye can see through invisibility cloaks?” He asked, raising an eyebrow as Moody laughed again, smirking.

“Well, if you are an Auror like me... You tend to be very suspicious... You need to make sure that whenever a dark wizard was around, you would be able to see him under *any* situation...” He answered calmly.

Harry nodded, not pushing the subject either but Moody seemed to be looking intently at his shoulder where his supposed birthmark was supposed to be, raising an eyebrow in question and looking at it in fear as though it was bound to attack him someday and almost as though he could see the mark through his clothes.

“By the way, Potter... What is this thing?” He asked, pulling out the marauder’s map and eyeing it closely again, his eyes once again filled with surprise as Harry smirked calmly, shrugging.

“Oh that was something I nicked from a couple of students last year... A map of Hogwarts. Extremely useful, really... I’ve been using it ever since when I sneak out.” He answered.

“I see... You didn’t, by any chance, see just who broke into Snape’s office did you? On this map, I mean... Surely—”

“Actually, yeah... It was Mr. Crouch.” He interrupted calmly, trying to snatch the map away but Moody held it out of his grasp, his eye searching the map frantically.

“Crouch?! I daresay, Potter! That’s.... That’s very interesting...” He murmured to himself, an unreadable look in his eye that Harry found highly suspicious.

“Professor? Would you by any chance have any idea why Mr. Crouch would be meddling around Snape’s office?” Harry asked sharply, giving the professor a suspicious look once again.

Moody looked at him intently for a long period of time, his magical eye coming to rest on Harry’s shoulder again where the mark should be just as Harry caught a faint glint of fearful loathing in his normal eye before it was masked once again.

“Well... You know what they say about Mad-Eye, Potter? That I’m so obsessed about catching dark wizards? I’m nowhere near compared to Barty Crouch.” He answered in a dark tone of voice, causing the Slytherin’s eyes to narrow at his words.

“So... you think Crouch might know something about all the weird events going on? Don’t think I haven’t noticed professor... Despite all the weird stuff already happening here at Hogwarts among the *students*, everything outside school is mayhem... It’s in the Daily Prophet... The dark mark at the world cup... The death eaters... I have a really sharp memory you know... I remember even the smallest things mentioned, even if I don’t talk much about it afterwards...” Harry said slowly, his eyebrows fused together.

Moody glanced at him again, this time looking very much surprised and calculating as he took in Harry's words and explanations.

"You're a sharp boy, Potter... It might be possible... There are a lot of rumors going around... Especially with that Skeeter woman adding to it... And of course, it there's one thing I hate... It's a death eater who walked free..." He said slowly, glaring at a certain spot on the map that Harry couldn't quite make out yet.

Harry watched different emotions fly across the Auror's face, watching as Moody seemed to snap out of a deep state of trance and glance carefully at him, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Potter... Would you mind if I borrowed this?" He asked, looking at Harry as Harry opened his mouth to say no, knowing that this map was one of his most treasured possessions, frankly because it had been his father, Sirius, Remus and... *Wormtail*... who had made it in their school years.

"Actually professor, I'm quite fond of that map so maybe if—"

"Good boy, Potter. This is exactly what I need... Anyway, right you should get going to bed now, Potter. Go on now." He ushered, obviously not listening as he gave Harry one final nod before walking off.

Just as he was about to turn a corner, he turned to look back at the bewildered Slytherin, who was watching him in confusion, suspicion and irritation all at the same time.

"By the way Potter, you ever think about becoming an Auror?" He asked, giving him a small lopsided smile which Harry returned with a fake one of his own.

"I'm not sure, Professor... Anyway, I'd better head off now... I was just trying to solve the egg clue tonight... I didn't mean to cause so much trouble." He lied, wanting to laugh out loud at his own words.

"Nothing like a good midnight stroll to give you ideas, eh Potter? See you in the morning then." He said, nodding once more before walking off, leaving Harry in silence.

Harry stood there for a long period of time, pondering over Moody's words before he finally shrugged and headed off towards Snape's office, momentarily wincing as he thought of what his head of house might say to him.

As he reached the office, he raised a hand and knocked briefly on the door but on the third knock, Snape had already bolted the door open and let him inside, a stern and sharp disapproving look on his features.

"Just *what* did you think you were doing out in the middle of the night, Potter?!" He asked sharply, causing the younger Slytherin to wince as he saw the angry glare in his teacher's eyes.

"I-I'm sorry, Professor but see, I was trying to solve the egg clue for the TriWizard tournament in the Prefect's bathroom... I had absolutely no idea I would get caught..." Harry explained slowly, giving Snape a sheepish look.

Snape didn't look convinced, raising his eyebrows in question at his favored student in front of him.

"If you were just in the Prefect's bathroom, then how did you wind up here? Filch would have caught you easily and even *I* couldn't bail you out of that, Mr. Potter, and you know it." He said irritably, glaring at him as Harry winced again.

"I know, Professor, and I'm really sorry about it but see... I was a bit curious when I saw someone rummaging around in your office on the marauders map so I went to investigate but somehow, I ended up with my damn foot stuck in that bloody staircase..." He mumbled, shamefully looking at his shoes.

Prof. Snape still looked highly suspicious, looking closely at the raven-haired Slytherin in front of him in question as though he was doubting the boy's story.

"Are you sure, Harry? Is there something you wish to tell me?? If you were the one who was looking for ingredients in my office, then pray tell, all you have to do is tell me. I would have given you the permission anyway." He said, raising an eyebrow in inquiry.

Harry snapped his head back up in alarm, his eyes widening at the unmistakable assumption that had been thrown at him. "No, Professor! It wasn't me! I swear, I wouldn't have taken something without permission, I'm too much of a fully trained Slytherin to disobey you like that!" He reasoned, looking mildly offended.

Snape sighed and nodded, his face still slightly pale and weary as he plopped down onto his seat, burying his face in his hands in exhaustion.

"Very well then, Potter... See that I don't... Or rather, *you* don't get caught like that again... It's too risky to be roaming the corridors late at night, especially for you... Watch your back." He said slowly, his voice slightly muffled.

Harry nodded in agreement but didn't make any move to leave, watching closely as Snape seemed to think deeply to himself, obviously contemplating on a serious issue that was bothering him.

"Professor?"

Snape looked up to meet Harry's puzzled green eyes, causing his gut to lurch dangerously again as he saw Lily in those eyes of his student's... Once again causing another painful tidal wave of emotions to wrack his body.

"What did Moody mean about my father stealing something of yours back then? I have heard that you and my father were once bitter rivals at a time when you were a student.... But... What was Moody whispering about? Is there something about you and my father that I should know?" He asked slowly, gazing intently at his favorite professor.

Snape stared back calmly at him, easily meeting his gaze with masked black eyes as though he was having an inner debate with himself whether or not he should answer before he finally spoke, his voice a soft and hoarse whisper.

"Harry... Your father... James... James and I were bitter *enemies*... Always have been and always will be... He was Mr. perfect after all... Gorgeous... Popular... Charming but extremely



*arrogant*...and I was the slimy-haired, no-good, conniving Slytherin...the one everyone was afraid of.” He said as Harry watched him silently with surprised eyes.

“I was the one glaring darkly at everyone else in the corridors... I barely had any friends at all since they all hated me for some reason.. I was the outcast... The loner... Even my fellow Slytherins rejected me because I was known to be weird and pathetic in a way... No one wanted to talk to me, especially since they knew I was especially skilled in the dark arts.. They were afraid.” Snape said poisonously, his eyes clouded in anger and humiliation.

“I didn’t care though... I was perfectly fine as I was... I didn’t mind being feared or alone... Like I ever needed anyone in my life before anyway... They could all go to hell for all I care... Especially perfect Potter and his fellow *marauders*, as they called themselves... Or pretty-boy Malfoy and his gang of pesky jerks... I loved being who I was.” Snape said, a smirk on his face.

Harry’s eyes were wide with disbelief now as he briefly imagined how things must have been before with his father and his teacher... He hadn’t expected this sudden confession all of a sudden... He had been expecting some sort of short misunderstanding he and his father might have had but he didn’t know it was an actual *rivalry*.

“I only had one single and most loyal best friend throughout my entire duration at Hogwarts and she was very well more than enough to keep me sane to sustain all I’ve been through... She stuck by me no matter what, strong as she was, and helped me survive all the pain...” He continued, his eyes strangely glazed over.

“Most of the other students, especially James and Lucius, found it laughable that the most beautiful, most confident and sought-after girl in school was best friends with the school outcast... See, she was not only those things but she was also loved and popular among others, independent and very much strong in every aspect. All the boys went crazy for her and she went through them as fast as she went through shoes, too proud and conceited to take any of them seriously and who was I to mind? I liked the idea that she cared about no one else sincerely except for me.” Snape said, smiling slightly.

Harry nodded slowly again, briefly wondering who Snape might be talking about that had made such a huge impact on his life somehow.

“Along the way of our friendship... I fell in love with her somehow... Of course, it was hard not to fall in love with some one like her... She was strong... Smart...*Beautiful*...Loyal... Everything I could have hoped for and when I finally admitted my feelings, I had been crushed to find out she saw me nothing more than her best friend... She didn't want to cross over that certain risky barrier between friendship and lovers.” Snape said bitterly.

“Of course, being who she was, she told me this the most considerate way possible and she promised that she would think long and hard about her feelings for me... That she would give me her answer when the time was right... And being the *foolish* teenager I was, I had gotten my hopes up that somehow, she might feel the same way...” Snape continued, his voice pained and heavy.

“But then... All that changed when she and Malfoy, who seemed to be the only one she didn't bother dating because of the animosity between them, had made this certain deal... This certain *dare*, if I recall correctly, in which the stakes were too high for the both of them to not succeed... Should she have lost, she would have given in to Malfoy's demands and she did *not* want that...” Snape explained, more to himself now than to Harry anymore.

“At first I thought it would never happen... She would never fall for *him*...But... She did... Both she and Malfoy had to eat back their words soon after... And everything went downhill for me after that... Because of my bitterness, I had done a lot of terrible things I'm not proud of at all.” He said, a dark look in his eyes.

“Nothing else mattered anymore... She never forgave me for the things I did... When I realized how wrong I was, it was too late... Too late to say sorry to my best friend...” Snape finished, now blinking and turning away from Harry.

“Who was she, Professor?” Harry asked in curiosity, noting the sudden stiffness in Snape's shoulders at his question.

Snape purposely did not answer his question, getting up from his seat and grabbing the nearest bottle of whiskey from his cabinet, gulping most of the bottle's contents in one gulp, blinking again before turning to look at Harry.

"So... Harry, did you by any chance manage to see who was rummaging through my office in the map earlier?" He asked suddenly, causing Harry to start in surprise at the abrupt change of topic and step back slightly.

"Pardon, Professor?" He asked in surprise again, blinking at him as Snape turned to look back calmly at him, raising an eyebrow as though he had suddenly changed his mood entirely all in one blink of an eye, confusing Harry with his sudden calm attitude.

"Don't play innocent with me, Harry... Don't you I think I know you well enough already? Now who was in my office tonight?" He asked again, eyeing his favorite student with a sharp glare.

Harry winced at the implied accusation, giving his head of house a rather sheepish but amused smile.

"Well.. See sir, as I said, was on my back to the Slytherin dorms when someone caught my eye on the marauder's map... I had to investigate to see what he was up to of course..." He started, sounding thoughtful.

Snape looked impatient, fiddling with his fingers and tapping them pointedly on his desktop, giving Harry an annoyed look. "Yes, yes, I already know all about that part Harry. Just tell me, *who* was in my office?" He asked again, this time more sternly.

Harry flinched under the pending glare again but nodded, giving in and looking up to meet the older Slytherin's eye as he answered. "It was Barty Crouch sir... I saw him rummaging around your office about fifteen minutes before you met up with Filch..." He answered.

Snape's eyes widened in shock as he stared at Harry, his jaw dropping open slightly and his eyes clouding over in confusion. "*Crouch?! Are you sure, Harry? Are you absolutely certain with what*

you saw or are you just trying to put the blame on someone else?" He asked, fusing his eyebrows together.

Harry flushed dark red, slightly angry and indignant at his head of house's persistent accusations again and his disbelief at his words.

"Sir, I assure you, it was Barty Crouch. I saw his name on the map with my own two eyes. I would have asked your permission properly sir if I had wanted some potion ingredients from your office." Harry snapped angrily, his eyes flashing in indignation again.

Snape's eyes narrowed in anger as he easily met Harry's glare, both Slytherins remaining deathly silent in the room as they waited for the other to look away or to speak first.

Finally, Snape gave in and opened his mouth to respond something equally sarcastic to the younger Slytherin when the door burst open, causing both wizards to whirl around in surprise to see the boy running into the room.

Blaise stumbled onto the floor in front of them, breathing heavily and his eyes slightly glazed over as Harry noticed that his clothes were smeared in some places with blood.

Harry and Snape both stood up abruptly, instantly sensing that something was wrong as Blaise ran forward, breathing very heavily as though he had just run a whole mile just to get there.

"Mr. Zabini, what is the meaning of this?! You should be asleep at this hour; it is the middle of the night!" Snape barked angrily but seeing the blood on his clothes, his eyes widened and he forgot about his lecture altogether.

"P-professsor!! I-I..I-I'm sorry I—" Blaise struggled to take in a gulp of air, stumbling onto the desk to help himself stand as Harry eyed him silently, his eyes creased in anxiety and nervousness at the sight of his fellow Slytherin in such a state.

"What the fuck happened, Zabini?" Harry asked coldly, his calm, collected voice betraying the fear and the tension that was pounding painfully into his chest.

Blaise turned to look at him with wide, panicked and slightly wild gray eyes, his hair disheveled and his face as white as a ghost's as he tried to stutter out the words he desperately needed to say.

"I-it's... It's AJ, Harry... I saw.. She.. She was... I—" He stuttered again as Snape hurriedly rushed to get him a glass of water to speak properly, feeling his pulse racing in panic.

At the mention of his sister, Harry stood up abruptly, his eyes widening in horror and his face almost instantly turning as pale as Blaise's was already, feeling his stomach lurch dangerously inside him.

*Oh Merlin...My scar...My scar had hurt earlier, why didn't I think of it before?!* He thought in panic, feeling his heart starting to pound rapidly in his chest as he watched Blaise sputter out the words.

'What about her?! Huh?! Zabini, dammit! Tell me what the *fuck* happened?!" Harry yelled angrily at him, grabbing Blaise by the front of his shirt and pulling him roughly so that they were face to face, seeing the fear reflected in each other's eyes.

"I-I.. She... I just saw her Harry... She was on the floor... B-barely b-breathing and unmoving..." He said, his voice a deathly whisper that seemed to seethe into Harry's ears slowly and painfully.

"Mr. Zabini, would you please calm yourself? We won't understand a word you are saying at this state and it is important you tell me what has happened." Snape spoke calmly although he looked as worried as Harry, who was now shaking in fear and panic.

*"Tell me!! FUCKING TELL ME, ZABINI!!!"* He screamed angrily, now lifting the other boy up into the air so that his feet were no longer touching the floor, his emerald green eyes glinting maniacally.

Blaise sputtered again, trying to wrestle himself out of Harry's tight grasp as he met the other boy's angry, demanding eyes, gulping before trying to speak again.

"We didn't know what happened Harry... Sh-she was covered in her own blood and the mirror in t-the girl's dorms were shattered to

pieces... T-there was also a broken flask on the floor b-beside her... We th-think there may h-have been a struggle in there..." He whispered again, his voice cold and raspy as Harry's hands shook violently and he dropped the boy instantly, his heart now pounding so loudly it was painful.

"Harry—" Snape began but Harry wasn't listening, now looking at Blaise again but his eyes looked unfocused as though he had gone into a deep state of trance, not at all hearing his professor's restraints at him.

"Where is she?" He whispered, his voice barely audible but Blaise caught every word, shuddering at the calm, deathly silent tone in the other boy's voice.

"Draco carried her to the hospital wing... I swear Harry... Her b-body was so c-cold and pale... Her wrist was cut deeply... Sh-she wasn't moving at all... I-it was D-Draco who first saw her and he t-told me to tell you as soon as possible... I—"

But Harry wasn't listening anymore as he immediately shoved past Blaise and tore out of the room, running as fast as he could to the Hospital wing, not at all caring if he ran into any teacher or Filch and got himself detention for the whole year.

"Harry!" He heard both Snape and Blaise's voice yelling after him but he didn't turn around, running even faster as he rounded the corner, crashing himself into a suit of armor noisily in the process.

Feeling tears of frustration well up in his eyes, he picked himself off the floor and tore off again, ignoring the mess of armor behind him or the loud but slightly slower footsteps of Prof. Snape and Blaise who were trailing after him.

Panting heavily, he crashed himself into the entrance of the Hospital wing, breaking through the door and causing it to bang noisily on the inside, revealing Madam Pomfrey, who was frantically searching around the room with a number of healing potions in her arms.

Harry rushed into the room, finally seeing Draco, who was sitting beside his sister's unmoving, deathly pale figure lying on one of the beds, his hand clutching hers lifeless one tightly.

Harry's eyes however, didn't remain on his best friend but instead, riveted intently on his sister, who was now almost as pale as the hospital sheets she was lying on, smudges of blood found on various parts of her skin.

Moving his gaze, he saw the deep freshly bleeding gash on her wrist and another one on her palm, both wounds still bleeding profusely and leaking out blood, staining the white sheets underneath her.

Draco had obviously not heard him come in, his silver eyes fixed intently on AJ's motionless form as he barely moved at all himself, allowing Harry to see that he had not even bothered changing out of his tux yet, just as AJ was still in the gown Harry had bought for her that night.

He felt his eyes threaten to cloud over in tears but he angrily held them back, taking slow, silent steps towards his twin, causing Draco to start and look up in alarm, finally exposing anguished, pained eyes which were filled with tears that were threatening to spill over.

If not for the situation, Harry would have been astonished at seeing his best friend crying like that because for as long as he could remember, he had never seen Draco cry before...

Sure, maybe *he* had cried several times enough in the past in front of AJ but never had Draco ever revealed such emotions about himself... He was a Malfoy and as far as Harry knew, Malfoys were trained, if anything, *not* to cry.

Harry didn't say anything, just meeting those silver orbs with his emerald ones, knowing full well that the grief in there was being reflected in his own but at the moment, he didn't care, tearing his eyes away from Draco and walking towards his twin again.

"Harry..." Draco started but Harry just snapped his head back up and glared at him, his eyes flashing coldly in threat, causing Draco to flinch and look away, biting his lip.

Breathing heavily, Harry sat down onto the side of the bed opposite Draco and raised a single hand to stroke his twin's deathly cold and clammy forehead, feeling his eyes fill with tears again but he refused to let them drop.

Draco watched silently as Harry gently traced his sister's scar before leaning over and planting a shaky kiss on the offending mark, using his other hand to push back her hair from her face.

"Harry... She was like that when I found her... I rushed her here immediately... I don't know who did it but... I was so fucking scared I—" Draco's shaky voice trailed off but he didn't have to finish his sentence for Harry to understand what he was trying to say.

*Someone attacked her... Someone had tried to kill her...* Harry thought in realization, his hands clenching into angry fists as his eyes clouded over, suddenly desperate to see if his twin was still alright.

Harry gently picked up her other lifeless hand and held it in his own, using his other hand to desperately look for a pulse, feeling an immense wave of relief wash over him as he felt a slow, unsteady one but a pulse nonetheless.

Harry and Draco both didn't look up as Prof. Snape and Blaise burst through the door, surprising Madam Pomfrey, who accidentally dropped several potion bottles she was rifling through in fear.

"What has happened, Poppy?" Snape asked, his eyes moving from Harry to Draco and finally to AJ, the black orbs widening in fear and shock.

Madam Pomfrey rushed forward towards AJ's lifeless body, hurriedly setting a number of potion bottles on the table beside the bed and taking the girl's bleeding hand away from Draco, who put up a weak fight of not letting her go.

"*Please*, Mr. Malfoy! Do not make this harder than it already is!" Madam Pomfrey reprimanded as she finally managed to pry the girl's frail hands away from Draco's grip as Draco just sighed and watched on, not bothering to wipe off the blood on his hand.



Harry refused to say anything but Draco could see from the rapidly forming tears in his best friend's eyes exactly what Harry was thinking at that exact moment... Though he tried to deny it numerous times before, Harry couldn't live without AJ...

Twins have always needed each other to survive and right now, just the thought of the possibility of losing her was enough to drive the raven-haired Slytherin completely insane.

His form slightly shaking, Harry intertwined his fingers with his sister's cold, motionless hand before leaning forward and resting his head in her shoulder, his eyes looking lost and about ten years younger than he was.

"Oh dear... She has already lost so much blood, Severus...I'm afraid I'm going to need to replace her lost blood soon... Her pulse is as weak enough as it is." Madam Pomfrey said worriedly as she began applying a potion onto AJ's deep wound, causing the spilling blood to magically stop flowing and seep back into her wrist.

Draco listened and watched her intently, his eyes unblinking and distraught as he watched Madam Pomfrey flick her wand over the deep wound, causing it to heal up slowly, the skin mending back together to cover up the blood trying to rush out again.

"You'll be able to, right?" Harry finally spoke, his voice cracking and raspy but it caught everyone's attention in the room, causing them all to look as Harry raised himself up, revealing a face almost as pale as his twin's.

Madam Pomfrey's heart nearly broke as he saw the pleading, desperate look in the Slytherin's eye, momentarily stunned at how much was being reflected in those lost emerald green eyes. It seemed as though at that very moment, Harry Potter looked like a timid five-year-old who was looking up at a group of strangers and asking for his mother.

"Of course, Mr. Potter...But... I'm afraid the case is more severe than that... See, from what Mr. Malfoy has described to me, there was some sort of struggle in her room and there are traces of some unknown potion in her blood... I'll need to find out what type of potion

she ingested... Hopefully, it's nothing serious but for all we know..." Madam Pomfrey didn't bother continuing as she saw the flash of fear in Harry's eyes again.

Snape, seeing a possible outburst from his student, suddenly rushed forward and bent over AJ's unmoving body carefully, feeling a cold sense of dread and fear well up inside him.

Blaise couldn't say anything as he just stood there, biting his lip and his eyes wide as he watched Snape take one of AJ's wrists and press a finger to the delicate skin, trying to make out a pulse.

Madam Pomfrey began taking out some more materials from the cupboards and placing it on the bed table, her movements filling the empty silence of the room since she was the only one moving at that very moment.

"Harry, I need you to give some of your blood to your twin... You *are* her twin by genes after all, are you—" Madam Pomfrey didn't get to finish her question as Harry stood up and walked over to her, holding out his wrist instantly.

Madam Pomfrey sighed and took the boy by the wrist, immediately setting to work while Draco watched Harry intently, who hadn't even flinched in pain as Madam Pomfrey magically began transferring some of his blood into AJ's own wrist, replacing the lost blood immediately.

After what seemed like a long couple of minutes, Harry finally took a shaky step back, his face pale from the blood loss, causing Madam Pomfrey to finally heal his wrist back up and usher him to sit onto the bed beside AJ.

"Sit down for a minute, Mr. Potter... You might feel a little dizzy and faint right now... Try and relax." She said gently.

Harry nodded and obliged, sitting down silently on the bed and grabbing his twin's hand again for reassurance, holding it tightly in his own. *She's going to be alright... She 'has' to be alright...* He assured himself desperately, his fingers trembling and tightening themselves against his twin's clammy hand.

Prof. Snape then began helping Madam Pomfrey in identifying the kind of potion AJ had taken in, both adults fussing over a number of complex spells and potions, silently muttering weird incantations under their breaths as they did.

“Mr. Zabini and Mr. Malfoy, would you both kindly go and kindly inform the headmaster of what has happened? After that, you may both proceed back to your dormitories. Despite tonight’s events, you are still way past over your curfew so if you would please.” Snape said briskly, turning to give Blaise and Draco a pointed look.

Blaise sighed but immediately left the room, his soft footsteps filling the silence of the hospital wing but Draco remained where he was, giving Prof. Snape an indignant glare.

“Mr. Malfoy, I said—”

“Please, Prof. Snape, I’d much rather stay here.” Draco interrupted, stubbornly looking at Snape directly in the eye as Snape blinked for a moment in surprise before sighing and turning back to work.

Harry watched, almost in a desperate hope, as Snape flicked his wand over his twin’s form again, causing her to glow a faint red before the light faded again and Prof. Snape’s face had paled, turning wide eyes to Madam Pomfrey.

“I knew it... It’s the *Draught of Endless Sleep*, Poppy... The same potion that has been taken from my office tonight...” He whispered but Harry and Draco caught every word, both boys watching the two adults closely.

Madam Pomfrey looked distressed as she looked from AJ to Snape, her eyes widening in fear. “Oh... But Severus... The Draught of Endless Sleep... There isn’t a cure for such a potion... What are we supposed to do?” She asked, watching the professor silently.

Prof. Snape thought for a moment before he muttered a spell under his breath again, this time causing AJ to glow a faint and just after the light faded and Snape turned to Madam Pomfrey again, looking extremely relieved.

“Fortunately, it is only phase 1 of the potion... It seems it was lucky I didn’t bother finishing the potion... Her body will cease to function properly for the time being almost as if she was dead but her brain will only be in a state of sleep filled with endless dreams of painful memories unbearable to the drinker...” Snape said, more to himself than to Madam Pomfrey, his eyebrows fused together in thought.

“Painful memories? But...No, that can’t happen, she wouldn’t be able to handle all that by herself! There has to be some kind of way to—” Harry stopped in midsentence and buried his tearful face into his hands, looking hopelessly lost and desperate.

“So we can still wake her up, Professor?” Draco asked, his voice cracking as Harry seemed too shaken at the moment to manage a single word, his hands now clutching his twin’s as though his own life depended on it.

Snape turned to look at Draco; momentarily stunned as he saw the same emotion in those silver orbs as the one he had himself when he was Draco’s age for...*her*... The memory itself was almost too much to bear and he shut his eyes, turning away from the younger Slytherin in shock.

AJ was nothing like...*her*... He was almost certain that the young Slytherin returned the same affections for Draco and that she would never leave him to go with some...*Gryffindor*...

*Draco doesn’t know how damn lucky he is... He doesn’t have to experience the same pain ‘I’ went through because of my mistake in falling in love... He has it the easy way... He has the chance to make the best choice...* Snape thought to himself bitterly before shaking his head to clear the thoughts away, meeting Draco’s confused look again.

“Yes... Mr. Malfoy but I don’t know how long it will take... The length of her sleep will be determined by the intensity of the potion she drank and if I’m not mistaken, the potion I made was quite strong even in its first phase... It might take days...months...in some cases—*years*...” His voice trailed off softly.

Harry felt his heart drop into his stomach, his eyes looking up to glance pleadingly at his professor. *No...No, I can't wait that long...No...I need AJ...I need my twin... I can't handle all this alone...I can't...* He thought, his vision blurring again at the thought.

"It is almost like.. For muggles, a *coma*? Unless of course..." Snape's voice trailed off but the desperate, hopeful determination in Harry's eyes willed him to continue.

"The only way to wake her up without having to wait out the time period is for the person she had last thought of before closing her eyes, to make his or her presence known to her somehow even in her sleep..." Snape explained, his face weary.

"How do we do that, Professor?" Draco asked, his eyebrows coming together in frustration. Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in thought, unsure of what he was going to answer to the blonde.

"I'm afraid I don't have the answer to that one, Mr. Malfoy... The way to wake up the drinker is different for every person...For every case... It is really up to the person AJ last thought of to somehow think of a way to wake her up...*Somehow...*" Snape said slowly, closing his eyes in thought.

Harry finally snapped, bolting from the bed and running into his professor angrily, his eyes glinting in maniacal anger and hysterical fury.

"*Somehow?*!What the *fuck* does that mean?! How the bloody hell are we supposed to do that?! Huh?! What...The...*Fuck!!*" Harry tried to say but he was overcome with so much anger that he collapsed back onto the bed, shaking and panting heavily.

"Harry—"

"How can you all stand there looking so calm when my twin sister is like this?! Don't you even care?! Huh?! What the *hell* is wrong with all of you?!" Harry screamed out, his voice hoarse and angry.

"Harry—" Draco tried again but Harry shoved him away roughly, his eyes looking wild and uncontrolled as he tried to restrain his pent-up

emotions inside. He felt a sharp, painful burning on his shoulder but he ignored it, glancing around the room like mad.

“Sod off, Draco!! How could you just sit there acting like nothing’s *fucking* wrong?! I thought you loved her dammit!! How the hell could you let her get hurt like that?! You were supposed to have protected her!! You were supposed to—” Harry screamed out again but his voice ended in a cough as he fell onto the floor on his knees.

Draco’s eyes clouded over in pain and guilt as though Harry had just taken a blow at him right in his chest... He had done it... Harry had struck a painful nerve inside of him deliberately... That was a blow right under the belt...

Madam Pomfrey tried to help Harry stand up but Harry shoved her away angrily, turning his anger onto Draco, who was now crying openly in front of him.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you, Draco?! You should have protected her with your own fucking, useless and pathetic life! You should have protected her the way I would have done! This is all your fault!! All your damn fault! Why didn’t you find her sooner?! Why didn’t you try harder to protect her?!” Harry cried out before he collapsed onto the bed, burying his face into his hands.

“Harry, that’s unfair... It wasn’t my fault... I—”

“Yes it was! It was *your* fault, Draco!!” Harry screamed angrily at him again, causing Draco to flinch and turn away, his vision now blurred with his own tears but he didn’t care as he just stared off into space.

“Harry, you are not being reasonable here. You know full well that Draco had nothing to do with what happened! He—”

Harry screamed out into the silence angrily again, interrupting Snape as everyone in the room seemed to jump and look at him in fear and shock.

His eyes were glowing an eerie bright green and the mark on his shoulder was now burning painfully into his skin but he didn’t care at

all, screaming as though the whole world had all just turned against him and he wanted to vent his frustrations out on everyone for it.

Madam Pomfrey gasped in fear as the windows in the hospital wing all shattered into a hundred tiny shards, showering onto them and the potion bottles burst into pieces noisily, the sharp glass spraying onto them.

Draco leaned forward and gently covered AJ's body with his own to protect her against the shower of sharp shards raining down onto them, wincing in pain silently as several of the pieces crashed down onto him, forming shallow wounds on his form.

He cringed again as a particularly large shard of glass cut deep into his arm but Harry didn't seem to be stopping anytime soon, screaming louder as more and more glass objects in the room shattered and Harry's body began to glow bright green, radiating his power and his energy.

Draco looked up just in time to see his best friend now floating several inches from where he had been on the floor, his eyes now glowing a frightening vivid green and his scar glowing with a strange silver light while convulsions wracked his entire body.

Snape watched, horrified, as Harry finally stopped screaming and collapsed back from the air onto the floor, completely spent and unconscious, the lights emitting from him fading abruptly, revealing Harry's pale and sweaty skin.

*The change is nearing...* Snape thought in fearful dread as Madam Pomfrey rushed forward to Harry's unmoving figure on the ground, avoiding the scattered shards of glass on the floor and magically levitating the Slytherin onto the bed beside AJ.

Draco then winced again and got off AJ's frail form, painfully pulling the shards of glass off himself and leaving freshly bleeding wounds that spilled out blood, staining his clothes.

*Merlin help us all...* Snape thought before sighing and began helping Draco with his injuries, wishing nothing more than for the night to end but no one seemed to notice Fierros, who was now growling at Snape,

almost as though the enchanted dragon pendant knew that there was something the older Slytherin was hiding within him.

“Are you okay, Harry?” Draco asked Harry awkwardly as they made their way to Hogsmeade several weeks after the incident, trying to ease the tension between them ever since that night in the hospital wing.

Harry looked at him in response, merely meeting Draco’s concerned eyes with blank ones of his own, looking deeply immersed in his own thoughts to have paid enough attention to what Draco had said.

“Fine...” He droned back dully, not even meeting Draco’s eyes as he spoke the words, his eyes glazing over again, locking himself away from the world around him once more.

Draco sighed wearily, rubbing his head at his best friend’s dull and flat response, knowing that Harry was very much the exact opposite of what he had answered.

Strangely enough, when Harry had woken up, he had not remembered a thing about what had happened to him except for the fact that AJ was still in a deep sleep because of the potion, which had been enough for him to fall into a silent state altogether, refusing to talk to anyone if he could help it.

By that time, everyone had learned about AJ being in the hospital wing in some kind of enchanted sleep that only Harry, Draco and Blaise knew the full details but the rumors spreading around school were enough to drive Draco completely insane.

*Damn all of them to hell...* He thought angrily as he remembered some of the more vicious rumors the students had managed to think up about how AJ may have been poisoned somehow.

So far, Harry had done nothing more these weeks except to think of possible ways to wake his twin sister up, becoming more and more desperate and hysterical at every failed attempt and the sight of seeing his best friend in such a state was almost too much for Draco to watch.



*He's a wreck...* Draco thought, glancing at Harry again out of the corner of his eye just as Harry blinked and turned away once more, staring off into space. *And so am I...* He admitted to himself, running a hand through his uncombed blonde hair, trying to smooth it out since he had not taken the time to fix it that morning at all.

After everything they had done so far, Prof. Snape finally convinced them that there was nothing more they could do than to wait for the effects of the potion to wear out hopefully within a couple of months and just that very concept had driven Harry crazy once more.

He had been thinking to himself the entire week, refusing to talk to anyone and sending a dark curse to whoever came up to him and dared to ask about his twin, not at all caring how many house points or detentions he would have to endure for it.

Harry had also been silent with Draco all throughout the week now ever since that incident, refusing to say anything at all or to talk about what had happened.

Draco had also noticed that Harry seemed to be sneaking off a lot to be *alone* with himself a lot this week but he wasn't stupid of course and he knew very well that his so-called best friend had been taking comfort in *Hermione Granger*, although he couldn't be sure if it was because of the bet anymore or something else.

In fact, ever since the Yule Ball, he had definitely noticed that Harry seemed to be avoiding his questions about Hermione altogether, changing the topic abruptly or suddenly running off to do something else whenever Hermione was mentioned among the Slytherins.

To put it mildly, this certainly didn't add to Draco's mood at all since it seemed to make him feel even worse at the fact that his life seemed to be taking a downward direction down the drain.

AJ was still in the hospital wing, his best friend wasn't talking much to him and distant and now he had to learn that there was the possibility there could be something between Harry and Granger, of all people...

*Nah... It couldn't be... Harry would never... Like... 'her', right? It just wasn't possible...* He thought again as they headed through the village, Harry ignoring the whispers people began at the sight of them.

He seriously hoped, for Harry's sake, that he would push through with the bet as he had so promised; because he knew that a relationship with someone like Granger would be dangerous for a Slytherin like Harry.

He only wanted what was best for his best friend of course... *Best friends know best, right?* He reasoned out to himself, not even bothering to answer his own question as he assumed it true right away.

Draco hadn't done much the past weeks after the Yule Ball and what had happened that night in the hospital wing except for spend most of his time with AJ, talking to her as if nothing had happened even though he was certain she couldn't hear him anyway.

Harry's words that night in the hospital wing had hit him hard like a hammer right to his chest...

*"This is all your fault, Draco! All your damn fault!"*

That one had hurt.... It had stung him deep in his gut and those words have been haunting his dreams at nights every time he thought about AJ, the girl he loved, lying their on that hospital bed, completely pale and bleeding, her body motionless and barely breathing at all.

It had *hurt*... It had hurt to think that Harry might be right... It might have been his fault... He blamed himself for what happened, even though a small part of him somehow knew that he had nothing to do with the incident.

Maybe that was the reason why Draco had seemed to take a great liking to spending all of his free time there in the hospital wing beside AJ, talking to her as though she was answering back in a light conversation, stroking her hair as he talked.

Sometimes, when he felt like it, he even told her about what happened during his day, laughing to himself as though he was

recounting the story to someone who was actually talking back, ignoring the sad looks Harry was giving him as he did.

It was almost like he felt that he was almost *pretending* and *hoping* that by talking to her somehow, he could reach her even in her deep state of coma and that she could actually understand him back even though she couldn't talk to him.

And though, Draco wasn't so sure, but it seemed at times that while he talked to her, AJ's lifeless hand he held in his own would occasionally twitch, almost as though it was meant to be a squeeze of comfort for him and the simple gesture had brought secret hints of moisture in Draco's eyes.

But.... *I seem to be taking this a lot better than Harry though...* He thought, sighing as he eyed Harry again, who was now staring blankly and silently at the different stores they passed along the village, his thoughts miles away from where they were.

In contrast to him, Harry never said much whenever he was with his twin in the hospital wing but instead, he would just climb up onto the bed beside her and snuggle up next to her, hugging her tightly to him and refusing to do anything more.

He wouldn't even speak or close his eyes, just keeping them open and hugging her tightly, almost afraid to let her go and yet at the same time, seeking comfort from his twin's reassuring warmth.

He hadn't even slept in his own bed since the incident, sneaking out every night time and snuggling into his twin's hospital bed sooner or later where Madam Pomfrey would find him the next morning but she never had the heart to make him leave, knowing how much sleeping with his sister meant to the Slytherin.

Blaise seemed to be equally shaken up by the whole incident as well while most of the students had just found it as more gossip to talk about while what had pissed Draco off the most was how Weasley had been acting about the entire situation.

*For someone who supposedly AJ 'loves', Weasley sure is proving himself worthy of it...* Draco thought darkly, his eyes narrowing

dangerously as he thought of how the ever so noble *Gryffindor* had reacted.

It seemed as though Ron had obviously not known what to do at all about what happened as he would occasionally drop by the hospital wing, though rather awkwardly, at times he was sure neither Harry or Draco were there. He would fidget around uncomfortably and speak to her in awkward situations as though he was talking to a complete stranger and he didn't have a clue what to say.

*I would know...* Draco thought irritably at himself as he recalled how on some occasions, he would eavesdrop on whatever Weasley had to say to AJ whenever he managed to see the redheaded Gryffindor head for the hospital wing.

Draco had to admit that even though he had already given up AJ for... For *Weasley* that night... He still couldn't hide the jealousy and the pain flaring up inside him whenever he saw the Gryffindor and he had the sudden urge to pound the other boy into pulp onto the ground but he knew that would be giving in.

*A Malfoy had much higher pride than that...* He told himself on numerous occasions wherein he had the sudden impulse to throw one punch right into Ron's freckled face just for wanting to get near *his* girl but he knew, with a sinking heart, she wasn't his girl at all.

He didn't even want to think about how much his pride had been bruised when he had to cope about the fact that a *Weasley* had been chosen over him, a *Malfoy*, but somehow, it was much more than just that...

Weasley had bested him for the only girl he knew he would ever want in his life and just that fact was enough for him to feel scorn and hatred whenever the boy would walk into the room.

To make it simple, the reason he hated Weasley so much was not only because of his house, his family or mainly his *existence*... It was just the fact that Weasley would always have something he could never have... And that was AJ... He *hated* him for that...

And what was worse, Weasley seemed to be spending a lot of time with *Lavender Brown* a lot these days, whether in the library or in the Hogwarts grounds. Draco saw that it was purely innocent but he couldn't help but notice the way that Lavender seemed to be looking at Ron in a special, unreadable way he couldn't quite understand.

He failed to notice, however, the fact that Ron's eyes always seemed to sparkle especially whenever he was speaking to Lavender as well, both Gryffindors obviously growing a mutual understanding between the two of them, much to Hermione's amusement.

*He has the privilege of AJ liking 'him', though I don't know why the bloody hell she does, and he hangs out with Brown?!* Draco fumed angrily, wanting nothing more than to punch the redhead's lights out with a single swing.

"Why did you do that article about Hagrid with Rita Skeeter?" Harry asked quietly all of a sudden, breaking through Draco's heavy thoughts just as they entered a bookshop near the back of the village, a hint of coldness in his voice.

Draco blinked for a moment, taken back by his question but despite his heavy thoughts, sneered at Harry in disdain, raising an eyebrow at the question.

"Why not? You heard what *Montague* heard him tell Madame Maxime the night of the Yule Ball.... He's a *half-giant*." Draco answered back easily, sniggering to himself as Harry's eyes flashed with fury at him, causing him to instantly regret his words.

"So *what?! Why* would I *bloody* care about something as shallow as that?!" Harry seethed, his voice now more similar to a hiss of a snake as though he was trying very hard not to lose his temper.

"*Because*, half-giants should *not* be allowed to teach innocent students. It's not right to be put in such a dangerous presence! Look what happened to me in third year! I stated that in that freakin' article!" Draco snapped, his anger getting the better of him, wanting to take his frustrations out on Harry's sudden outburst.

Harry didn't flinch but Draco saw his eyes stormy with unreleased anger but what surprised him even more was that he wasn't even intimidated by it, finding himself calm and half-expecting Harry to explode.

"You *know* Hagrid would never harm a fly.... Why did you put that lie about all of us '*hating*' Hagrid? And Crabbe getting bitten by a *flobberworm*?! What the bloody hell was that?!" Harry snapped back, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Draco just smirked to himself, rolling his eyes carelessly, obviously not interested with the topic. "Well, Rita Skeeter was asking for more evidence and we gave it to her. You were supposed to be with us that time but you... were... once again, *unavailable*." Draco said slowly, trying to get a hint as to where Harry had been at the time.

Harry didn't take the bait however and just stared back calmly at Draco, an eyebrow raised weakly in question and irritation. "What's this crap about me being friends with a werewolf, a half-giant and a snake?" He asked sharply, giving them a grim look.

Draco just snorted but nodded, the corner of his lips lifting into a sideways smile. "Well, it *is* sort of true isn't it? But I had nothing to do with that...The rest were all Skeeter's work..." Draco admitted, ignoring several third year students in the bookshop who were throwing nervous glances at the Slytherin duo.

Harry clenched his jaw but said nothing, his eyes storming up again in complete, cold and intimidating silence in which no one else could have understood what the boy was thinking of or was about to do at the moment.

It was during times like these that all the Slytherins feared annoying or angering Harry in any form or way possible because they knew he was in his darkest moods when he was silent and they were afraid that because of his silence, they never knew what he was thinking or planning.

"The *Gryffindors* seemed to enjoy the article." Draco taunted again, again trying to bait Harry but he refused to take it, merely raising an eyebrow as he met Draco's smirking gaze easily.

All throughout the weeks, Draco had made sure Ron, Hermione and Seamus, Hagrid's Gryffindor friends and the only other student friends Hagrid had except for Harry and AJ, had read a copy of the *Daily Prophet* by taunting them relentlessly in the hall.

Sometimes, to keep the image up, Harry had played along even in his current state of depression, as long as the taunting didn't involve the mention of the article but Harry had, once again as Draco noticed, stopped directing his insults at Hermione and instead, had directed them at Ron or Seamus.

*I have a feeling Harry is in for a losing bet...* Draco thought in utter amusement, a sadistic smile on his face as he thought of the consequences his best friend would have to do to make up for this.

Of course, Draco had known that soon after, Harry had visited Hagrid about the article to confirm him about it and had even written a lot to Sirius lately about what's been happening so far before the Second task.

That was all anybody seemed to talk about these days... *The Second Task...* Harry had even told Draco that the last letter Sirius had written to him was the shortest and the curtest he had ever received, only telling him to set a date for a possible meeting.

*I have a feeling the second task is the last thing on Harry's mind right now...* Draco concluded, sneaking another glance at Harry as the other Slytherin moodily picked a book up from a shelf about the Dark Arts, leafing through it casually as though it was the most natural thing to do in the world.

Several other students in the shop looked at Harry suspiciously for reading such a book but Harry didn't seem to notice any of them, leafing through the book with a blank look on his face.

Draco winced inwardly when he caught sight of Padma Patil and several other of her Ravenclaw friends pass by the shop, immediately ducking between several bookshelves to avoid being seen by any of them once again.

It seemed as though Padma had a different view of what had happened during the Yule Ball for the two of them that night and had of course, been recounting the story over and over to her Ravenclaw girlfriends all the time, causing the rumors to spread around school.

Draco hadn't affirmed or denied anything at all, not even answering the questions his own Slytherin friends had thrown at him about what happened except the fact that "*I dumped her after the Ball.*" And that was more than enough for the Slytherins to believe him.

"Harry... Have you figured out what you're supposed to do for the Second task yet?" Draco asked warily, watching as Harry put down his book and picked another one up again though it was quite obvious he wasn't going to buy anything.

Harry blinked, dazed before turning emotionless eyes to Draco, looking far off and distant from where he actually was. "I guess so..." He drawled, shrugging before he turned back to the book, inspecting it absently.

Draco rolled his eyes and wandered away, annoyed at Harry's unbecoming behavior as he headed off into another aisle, glaring threateningly at the girls in the shop who dared to throw interested glances his way.

Just as he was about to turn and head off into the next aisle, he heard a familiar voice behind him speak out loud coldly, immediately causing a surge of anger and hatred to rush through him as he whirled around to face the offender.

"Malfoy."

Draco sneered at the redheaded Gryffindor in front of him, wrinkling his nose in disdain as though he was eyeing something filthy, looking down at him in a snobbish manner.

"Weasley." He drawled back easily, smirking as Ron's eyes flashed with anger at him, both boys glaring at each other right in the eye, both unwilling to look away first.



“Why pray tell, what, may I ask, are you doing inside a *shop*? Do your parents actually give you an allowance now?” Draco drawled slowly, still smirking as Ron’s ears turned a bright shade of red at the insult.

“Sod off, Malfoy. At least my parents’ forearms are without any marks, am I right?” Ron countered easily, narrowing his eyes at him in utter loathing.

Draco stiffened in anger at the secretly implied meaning of the Gryffindor’s words, his shoulder’s tensing and his hands tightening into angry fists. “I don’t know what you mean, Weasley.” He answered back calmly, hiding the anger behind the dangerously calm tone of his voice.

Ron didn’t answer and he never got the chance to as Draco’s eyes were finally drawn to the girl beside him who had her arm linked through his, a slightly nervous and cautious expression on her face.

Draco’s eyes widened in recognition as he saw Lavender Brown glaring right back at him in equal amount of dislike, a look of disdain on her delicate features which mirrored Draco’s own.

Without knowing the exact reason why, Draco felt another boiling surge of anger rip right through his gut at seeing Weasley and Brown together like this. *I can’t believe this sorry asshole... He has the nerve to be dating Lavender Brown like this when AJ is still in the hospital?!* He fumed silently to himself, his form shaking with anger.

“Oh look Weasley... You’ve actually found yourself a girlfriend who’ll actually *have* you... I wonder which one of you has it worse...” Draco said icily, his eyes cold and harsh as he thought he saw Ron wince slightly, a brief look of guilt flashing in his eyes.

“Shut up, Malfoy! Why are you always such an inconsiderate jerk?!” Lavender actually snapped at him, glaring at the Slytherin in anger after seeing that Ron had obviously lost whatever it was he was about to say.

Draco glared right back at her, the anger and hatred in his eyes so intense that Lavender took a step back from him in mild fear, her eyes looking nervous at the look on the boy’s face.

“Oh yeah? From what I’ve heard, that’s not how you thought of me before...” Draco drawled with a sensual smile, giving the girl a seductive wink which caused Lavender to immediately blush in response.

He held back a round of mocking laughter as Ron’s eyes blazed with fury at the sight, obviously threatened by Draco’s flirtatious administrations.

“Don’t talk to her that way, Malfoy, you don’t even know what you’re talking about.” Ron said calmly, trying to walk past Draco but Draco stopped him by shoving him back violently, his eyes glinting in malice.

“I’ll talk to your little bitch over there anyway I want to Weasley, she’s not even worth defending... But then again, she does seem more suited for you, doesn’t she, Weasley? You never deserved anything better than *Brown* but I don’t know why someone up there gave you more than you bargained for...” Draco snapped, shoving Ron away again.

Ron’s eyes clouded over in confusion, looking at Draco as though he had gone insane. “What the bloody hell are you talking about Malfoy? I can’t understand a word you’re saying, *ferret!*” He snapped, shoving the boy back but Draco barely moved, standing his ground firmly.

“I’m talking about *her*, Weasley! *Her!* You never deserved her anyway and you never will! It’s just so fucking unfair! Why couldn’t you have just stuck to your own filthy kind?! Is it because you’re the bloody *good guy* and I’m the evil jerk?! Why do *you* have to get everything?!” Draco exploded, drawing some of the other student’s attention in the bookshop towards them.

Ron’s eyes looked completely bewildered as he eyed Draco as though he had grown an extra head, his eyebrows fused together in confusion. “I honestly do *not* know what you mean...I think you’ve gone completely off your rocker...!” He exclaimed, looking incredulous.

“Damn you Weasley! I hate you! I *fucking* hate you!! If you’re not going to take care of her the way she deserves, then I never should have let her go in the first place!” Draco blurted out accidentally but

as soon as the words had left his lips, his eyes widened in shock, wishing he could eat his words right back.

Lavender and Ron looked at him still in confusion but before either of the Gryffindors could say anything else, Draco had cursed out loud and fled from the bookshop, storming out the door and leaving the Gryffindors in stunned silence.

*He doesn't deserve her... He never did... I can't believe I actually let AJ choose him over me... I should never have given her up in the first place...* Draco thought darkly to himself, running a hand through his hair before walking off, needing some time alone to think.

Harry, who had been watching from a distance in confusion, blinked and watched as Draco pushed through the doors of the shop and headed off towards a more secluded part of Hogsmeade, obviously wanting to be alone.

*I wonder what Draco and Weasley were talking about...* Harry thought, now glaring darkly at Ron when the Gryffindor had glanced at him for a moment in confusion but seeing the other half of the Slytherin duo glaring angrily at him, Ron tensed and moved away, leading Lavender out of the shop.

Harry looked away and sighed heavily to himself, slowly making his way around the shop and walking out as well but instead of following after Draco, he turned and headed off to the opposite end of the village, taking his invisibility cloak out of his pocket.

In silence, he made his way to the fountain in the middle of the village, hoping to find some silence and some time to himself there without anyone else nagging him and getting on his nerves about what had happened to his twin or about the Second task.

He stopped however, when he caught sight of Hermione there, who was sitting peacefully on the ledge of the fountain, her nose buried in a book and her shiny brown hair pulled neatly into a low ponytail.

Harry didn't bother taking off his invisibility cloak, just watching the beautiful Gryffindor silently as she seemed to smile to herself,

chuckling lightly before she turned the page in her thick pocketbook, her brown eyes skimming the page.

Despite everything he had been through his week and his depression at his twin's state, Harry felt as though the only times he could manage a smile these days was when he was with Hermione, who seemed to be the only one to make him forget about his problems, even for just a short time.

She seemed to be the only one who was keeping him sane nowadays since with her, they didn't talk about their problems but they just enjoyed each other's company, talking as though they were the only two people in the world.

He had never dreamed of ever feeling like this before... Of actually looking forward to their rather innocent dates together and actually spending so much time with a single girl alone, not wanting anyone else besides her.

He hadn't even thought of the bet he and Draco had made ever since the Yule Ball and just the mere memory of it shot an incredible pang of guilt and dread into Harry's chest, as he briefly reminded himself that he would have to make a decision soon... A decision between breaking off with Hermione... Or telling Draco the bet was off...

How he could he manage to cope with such humiliation from his best friend like that? It had been what Draco was saying all along... He had fallen for the girl he had been trying to seduce but more than being ashamed of it, it was the greatest thing that had ever happened in his life...

He never would have dreamed that that bet was more of a blessing than a challenge... A chance for him to finally find the girl that would make him happy all his life and now that he's found her, he didn't want to let her go...

He knew that he would have to tell Hermione sooner or later about the bet because if not, she could find out from someone else and *that* would hurt her even more... He didn't want to put her through that again... He didn't know how he could cope with hurting her again...

And somehow, deep in his heart, he knew that if he ever did hurt Hermione again, she would *never* forgive him... She was much better than that... She wasn't a cheap slut like those other girls... She didn't deserve to be treated like dirt...

This whole thing had been bothering him for days now... The only person he had told about this was AJ... Though he knew very well that his twin was in a deep state of sleep and couldn't hear his words, he had been telling her everything happening to him each night when they were alone...

Madam Pomfrey had even thought he was nuts when she found him lying beside her, looking like he was talking to himself as he told AJ about how he had fallen in love with Hermione and how he was going to confront the bet and Draco about the truth...

AJ of course, could never say anything back in response but Harry didn't seem to be looking for any response as he just snuggled into her and hugged her as he slept, feeling secure and comforted at just being able to hold his twin and feel her soft breathing against him.

Up until now, he and Hermione had been putting up some kind of façade in front of all of their friends whenever they were in public but Draco seemed to be getting a bit suspicious of the way Harry had stopped directing his insults at Hermione, directing it more on Ron and Seamus, whom Hermione had to stop on most occasions from jumping onto the Slytherin duo.

Then, it was also within those certain moments when Harry would feel his day and mood lighten slightly just when Hermione's warm eyes met his and those beautiful brown orbs seemed to smile for her, reminding Harry of the song they had danced to at the Yule Ball.

Of course, Harry still had to force himself to insult Hermione every now and then in front of everyone but now, his insults were no longer filled with malice of contempt but instead were filled with a hint of teasing and lighthearted humor, which had even caused Hermione to hide a smile to herself.

Ron and Seamus both seemed oblivious to the aura between the former enemies but Draco could very well sense each and every jibe

Harry and Hermione had thrown at each other, narrowing his eyes at Harry in disgust which Harry had returned with a blank look.

All throughout the week, he had been avoiding his best friend for a number of reasons and they all seemed to make him angrier at Draco each time he thought about them. First, there was the hospital wing incident and then, Hagrid's article... Then of course, his persistent taunts about the bet which Harry had avoided talking about altogether.

The surprising thing was, he had not even thought about sleeping with Hermione at all this whole week... He had been content and satisfied with just holding her in his arms silently and kissing her to make all his pain go away...

He was actually acting like a lovesick idiot and he knew it... He remembered the way he had always taunted and mocked all those steady couples before in the past but now, he realized that he actually wanted to be like them... To have a steady girlfriend once and for all...

He knew full well which choice he *wanted* to make at this point... He *wanted* to call the bet off and publicly go out with Hermione but the real question was, *would* he make that choice?

*I wonder what AJ would have told me about this... I know she would have understood this problem more than anyone else...* Harry thought, tears stinging the corner of his eyes at the thought of his twin but he shook them away, sighing heavily.

Hermione heard the faint sound and looked up from her book, startled and she scanned the surroundings with wide, curious brown eyes, causing Harry to smile weakly in spite of his depression.

"Who's out there?" Hermione asked, looking around again but Harry finally managed a soft chuckle and pulled the invisibility cloak off him, allowing Hermione to see his weakly smiling but rumpled and pale form.

Hermione instantly broke out into a smile as she saw him but the smile faltered when she caught sight of the miserable look in his eyes, causing her own eyes to cloud over in concern.

“Are you okay, Harry?” She asked softly, gently setting the book down and standing up to face him, looking up slightly to meet his dreary and tired emerald green eyes.

Harry managed a weak nod and quirked the corner of his lips into a grin, his eyes sparkling with the ghost of slight amusement at the worried tone of her voice.

“Why? Do I look that bad?” He teased weakly, laughing at the crestfallen yet indignant look on her face as Hermione growled under her breath but rushed forward, hugging him tightly and burying her face in his chest.

“Of course not you silly git... Since when have you ever looked bad? You just look so tired...” She said, pulling away and caressing his pale cheek gently, causing the Slytherin to close his eyes and savor the feeling, enjoying Hermione’s warm and silky soft fingers on his cheek.

Harry opened his eyes again and smiled as he caught sight of the lion-shaped pendant he had given her, reaching over and gently caressing the pendant in his hand, marveling at how the necklace seemed to match against Hermione’s slender neck perfectly.

“Don’t you ever take this off?” He asked curiously, pulling away to meet Hermione’s slightly shy, blushing gaze as she pulled away and tucked the pendant back into her robes, laughing to cover her embarrassment up.

“No, I uh... It sort of gives me protection somehow... And good luck.. I’ve become a lot stronger and more confident of myself when I wear it... I know you must think I’m an obsessive idiot but—” Hermione stopped when Harry leaned forward and caught her lips in a sweet, chaste kiss, cutting her off midsentence.

Hermione forgot about her train of thought altogether as she leaned forward into the kiss, using one hand to wrap it around Harry’s neck to pull him closer, her head spinning wildly in dizzy circles.

When they had both pulled back, Harry pressed his forehead to hers again, his eyes shining with a faint hint of love and pure, unhidden adoration for the girl in front of him.

"You don't need it to be strong and confident... You already are..." He said truthfully, flushing as Hermione smiled and leaned forward again, giving him another kiss on the lips.

"It's not Shakespeare, Potter, but it'll do..." She teased, winking playfully at him as Harry couldn't help let out a laugh, shaking his head in mock indignation.

Hermione's face then turned sober as she led Harry back over to the fountain and she pushed him to sit on the edge before sitting down herself beside him and looking at him intently.

"How's your sister, Harry?" She asked softly, wincing as Harry's eyes flashed in anger and his form tensed, turning himself away from her questioning gaze in irritation.

"She's *fine*, Mione... I... I don't want to talk about it right now... It's bad enough as it is without you and everyone else reminding me about what happened..." He muttered darkly, feeling another feeling churning up inside him but he forced it back down in anger.

Hermione's eyes clouded over in guilt as she watched him, squeezing his hand in reassurance as she offered him a supportive, reassuring smile. "I'm sorry, Harry... I know how you must feel right now and—"

"No you *don't*, Hermione! No you *don't*! You've never experienced having a sibling, much more a *twin*, someone literally *one half* of yourself and you've never had to face the fear of your twin being gone... You don't know what it's like..." Harry snapped, his eyes shining in hushed tears again and his voice barely a whisper but the harshness in his tone made Hermione wince again.

"You don't know how it feels like... Having your twin so near yet you know she's worlds away from you... I've never even been without her for more than a couple of hours! I'm a wreck!" Harry blurted out, clenching his hands into tight fists.



Hermione didn't say anything but watched the boy tremble slightly in anger, feeling a rush of dread and shame filling inside her as she briefly wished she could take the stupid question away.

"Harry... AJ's going to be fine, okay? From what I've heard... The draught of endless sleep only induces something like a *coma* to its taker... And if the potion is only *phase* 1, as they say, then hopefully she should be waking up within a few months..." Hermione said softly but Harry wasn't listening anymore, his eyes staring off into space as he recalled how his twin had looked like the night they found her.

The image of his twin like that still brought nightmares to him every night and he would wake up screaming and clutching his scar, knowing that it was because of his twin that he was experiencing such visions.

He knew it had been wrong of him to blame everything that had happened at Draco but he had only done it because he was afraid of taking the responsibility himself, not wanting to face the idea that it might have been *his* fault AJ had been hurt so he took the easiest way out...

Blame it on someone else... Blame it on someone else he knew would readily take the blame because of how he felt for AJ and he had been right... It was so much easier to blame everything on Draco but he knew it wasn't fair at all...

Draco didn't deserve that blow... Harry had hit him right where it had hurt most and he hadn't bothered clearing it up because frankly, it made his life easier knowing that Draco was carrying the blame he knew *he* should have.

*I should have rushed to her side when my scar burned that night in the Prefect's bathroom...How could I have been so fucking dense?! I should have taken that as a warning, dammit!* Harry thought to himself angrily, locking out Hermione's worried words directed at his dazed stare.

"Harry? Harry! Harry, are you even listening to me at all?!" Hermione asked in exasperation, finally turning Harry's face to meet hers, a frustrated look on her face.

Harry finally sighed and turned to look at her again, managing another weak, forced smile but Hermione wasn't having any of it, returning his smile with a pointed glare, raising an eyebrow at him in response.

Harry sighed again but this time in irritation, forcefully looking away and staring at his shoes as though they were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen in his life.

"Look... Can you just drop it? I don't want to talk about it right now." Harry said coldly and abruptly, his tone of voice informing Hermione well enough that he meant each and everyone of his words.

Sighing in defeat, she nodded and leaned over, turning Harry's face to meet hers again as she leaned over and placed a kiss on his cheek in comfort.

"Fine then... How is the egg clue coming along? Have you figured it out yet?" Hermione asked, her eyes filled with keen interest as Harry's grim face instantly turned sheepish, running a hand through his hair.

"Er... Not quite... I have all the details but I have to polish it up a bit." Harry answered slowly, slightly amused when he saw the shocked, angry flash in Hermione's eyes.

"*What?!* Harry! The second task is nearly about to take place and you haven't finished the clue yet?!" Hermione screeched and Harry had the decency to wince, looking around hastily to make sure no one had heard them.

"Hermione, *shh!!* Keep your voice down! I don't want anyone to see me right now! Especially that wretched Skeeter woman..." Harry hissed under his breath, glaring warningly at her as Hermione reluctantly quieted down, looking slightly hurt at his words.

"So you don't want to be seen by anyone hanging out with me?" She asked softly, looking away, not seeing Harry's emerald green eyes soften and his facial expression turn into one of love and remorse as he looked at her.

Sighing, Harry got up and walked over to stand in front of her, kneeling down and using a hand to turn her face towards his own, finally allowing him to see the tears forming in her eyes.

“Hermione... I didn’t mean it that way... I just meant... Why are you crying?” He asked gently, using his thumb to brush away the tear that had rolled down her cheek, pushing back a lock of brown hair so he could look into her eyes.

Hermione sighed, rising up from where she sat and walking past Harry silently, wrapping her arms around herself before she spoke.

“Harry... I can’t take this anymore... I don’t want to be hiding like this from everyone for the rest of my life you know...” She said steadily, her voice sounding calm and neutral.

*I was afraid she’d bring that up again...* He thought, cringing to himself as he rose up to his feet as well, looking intently at Hermione’s steady form from where he stood behind her.

“Hermione... You know our friends would never accept us—”

“*Fuck* them, Harry!” Hermione interrupted angrily, whipping around to glare at the handsome Slytherin, surprising him momentarily at the sudden anger and rage he saw in her normally brown eyes.

“I don’t care what our friends think! Don’t you get that?! So what if you’re a Slytherin and I’m a Gryffindor?! Who cares?! Are you trying to tell me you’re going to let other people control your life for you?! I thought you were much stronger than that, Potter!” She snapped at him.

Harry didn’t say anything but over the times they had spent together so much that year, Hermione knew the Slytherin well enough to see the flash of anger and fury in the Slytherin’s green eyes.

“*No one* controls me, Hermione.” Harry answered back coldly, keeping his voice steady and unrelenting but she could already sense the tension seeping out from him from where she stood.

“Then prove it, Harry! *Fucking* prove it! Do you have any idea how painful it is that I have to lie to my friends so much all the time?! That I have to keep our relationship a secret from everyone else?! Why is it so hard for you to risk your reputation for this?!” Hermione asked softly.

Harry just stared back at her in silence and instead just turned away and stared out into space, his eyes looking glazed over as he did. Hermione watched him as he seemed to sigh and sit back down onto the ledge of the fountain, burying his head into his arms to hide his face. After a long, tense moment of silence, Harry spoke again, though his voice was slightly muffled as he refused to raise his head from his arms.

“This is *not* about my reputation... I just... You... *You* might find it easy to just tell your housemates about us, Hermione but... Slytherins are... Well... They’re *different*, Hermione... It’s just not that easy...” He tried to explain, not even understanding the words coming out of his own mouth.

Hermione didn’t look convinced as she just crossed her arms over her chest and raised a single eyebrow at him, undaunted. “Zabini came out with *his* girlfriend at the Yule Ball, Harry. And Hannah is in *Hufflepuff*. Even *I* can say that Hufflepuff is the *worst* house there is.” She pointed out irritably.

Harry snapped his head back up and glared at her in fury, his eyes narrowing in indignation and anger. “That was Zabini, okay?! He’s not me! I’m not him! It’s not that easy for me to accept this!!” He protested.

“I *know* that Harry but all I’m asking you to do is try! The first step in people accepting us is if we come out in the open altogether—”

“*NO!* Not yet! I can’t, I... Please, don’t rush me into this, Hermione! This is the first bloody time I’ve ever been in a *relationship* this long for Merlin’s sake! I don’t even know if I’m ready for this commitment!” Harry interrupted, his eyes looking panicked.

Hermione felt as though he had stabbed her right in the chest with his words, causing her to flinch inwardly and turn away so he couldn’t see the hurt look in her eyes before speaking.

“So... It’s the ol ‘*I’m not ready for commitment*’ excuse, huh Potter? Then what am I to you then? Am I just some kind of temporary fling that you’re just going to—”

“Hermione! I—”

“I know what you feel Harry... You don’t want the ball and chain huh? You want to be free to date other girls as well but you want me to wait around still for you as your *secret lover*, is that it?!” Hermione challenged, her eyes glinting dangerously.

“No! It’s not like that! I never said that, Hermione! Just give me a bit more time to sort myself out... I *told* you, this is the first time I’ve ever really been in this type of relationship... I need an *adjustment!*” Harry tried to explain, running a hand through his hair.

“Can I ask you something, Harry? That night at the Yule Ball, *why* did you say you loved me? Was that another one of your lines that you use to reel in other girls or did you just—”

“Because I *do* love you, Granger!! Dammit, I do *fucking* love you!! That’s exactly why it’s so hard for me in the first place!!” Harry yelled out angrily, violently punching the ground with his fist but he didn’t seem to register the pain at all, burying his head in his arms again.

Hermione jumped at the hostile act but her facial features softened at his words, the anger in her eyes vanishing and being replaced by affection as she slowly walked over to him, almost afraid of getting too close for comfort.

“Are you happy now?” He whispered softly, a slight trace of bitterness in his voice just as Hermione winced and clenched her hands tightly into fists at his words.

Harry didn’t look up but he felt Hermione’s footsteps draw nearer and nearer towards him until she finally knelt down in front of him just as he had done before, using her hands to pry his arms away from covering his face.

Seeing the frail, open look on Harry’s face, Hermione felt a twinge of guilt at having pressured him and took the boy into her arms, burying

her own face into his chest just as Harry slid off the fountain ledge and knelt down beside her, allowing her to envelop him tightly in her embrace.

Hermione gently snuggled into him, taking in his familiar, calming scent just as Harry seemed to do the same, his form slowly relaxing and his arms slowly making their way around her and pressing her tighter against him.

"I'm sorry, Harry... I didn't mean to lash out at you like that... But see... When you're in love with the, most sought-after boy in school, you kind of doubt his feelings for you after seeing all those other girls around lusting after him as well." Hermione said sheepishly, recalling how a strong surge of jealousy had taken her when she had passed by Pansy Parkinson and Lila Perrine giggling in the halls.

Harry remained silent but squeezed her in response, silently telling her to continue.

"I just had to know... To be sure once again, even though you already told me... That was why I wanted so much for us to go public... I want those other girls out there to know you're taken." Hermione said, her face forming into a scowl when she felt Harry holding back laughter in her embrace.

"It's not funny, you git... I still can't get over the fact that you've dated some of those other girls before me so... I guess there's still that fear of your old reputation... I'm sorry Harry... I should learn to trust you more often..." She said, sighing.

Harry felt another stab of guilt right through his gut at her words, knowing full well that even now, he never will deserve Hermione's trust... Not with that bet still ongoing right under their noses...

"Yes... You should..." He answered softly, keeping his face buried against her neck to avoid looking into her eyes.

"I know... I just feel like I'm wearing this huge mask in front of everyone else... I love you Harry... And I want to be able to experience the feeling of showing the whole world just how much I

do... That I'm proud of loving you." Hermione whispered, a beautiful smile on her face as she pulled back and met his gaze.

Harry felt his heart lurch dangerously forward at her words but he turned away sharply, feeling a sharp stinging at the corner of his eyes.

"I don't know how you can be... You deserve so much more than me, you know... You should never have made the mistake of falling in love with someone like me..." He whispered back, feeling a single tear slip down onto his cheek but Hermione wiped it away, kissing him on the exact same spot the tear had been stopped.

"Harry... People can't choose the people they fall in love with... It just... *happens*... Their heart chooses for them... And I was just lucky enough that mine chose you." She said, smiling at him.

Harry felt a heavy feeling lifted off his chest as he finally managed to smile back at her for the first time that whole week ever since what had happened with his sister, his eyes sparkling with life once again.

"And I was *unfortunate* enough that mine chose you, *Granger*." He teased, grinning at her but just as Hermione opened her mouth to protest, Harry laughed and pushed her down onto the ground, tickling her relentlessly while laughing himself.

Hermione giggled uncontrollably and tried to fend him off in indignation, using her hands to slap away his offending ones and growling in mock anger.

"Damn you, Potter!! You tactless jerk, that was below the belt!" She growled, managing to wrestle herself out of the Slytherin's arms and rolling him over so that she was on top of him.

Harry smirked up at her as Hermione's brown eyes flashed down angrily at him, her slender body lined up on top of his perfectly, almost as though they were two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that fit each other perfectly.

Harry raised an eyebrow, his lips quirking into a suggestive smirk at her. "Why Hermione! I didn't know you were that type of girl!" He teased, causing the Gryffindor to burn a bright crimson red and

smack him upside the head in embarrassment, making him to wince in pain.

“Ow!! Granger! What was that for?!” He growled, rubbing his head as Hermione rolled off him, still blushing furiously at his implied comment.

She straightened her robes hastily, ignoring Harry, who was scowling up at her in annoyance, rubbing his aching head in pain. Hermione just threw him a smirk that could have rivaled his own, unknowingly sending a shiver of enticement down his spine at the simple but sexy action.

“That was for *daring to dream*, Potter.” She answered back easily, laughing at disappointed, slightly put-out look on his face.

“Gryffindors...” Harry muttered under his breath, still rubbing his aching head as he pulled himself off the ground, dusting his robes in disdain.

Hermione laughed again but smiled at him, walking over and grabbing the Slytherin by the hand, leading him back towards the fountain ledge to sit down. Once he had, Hermione positioned herself on his lap, surprising both Harry and herself at the daring action, as she leaned back against him, snuggling into the handsome boy’s comforting warmth.

Harry quirked one side of his lips into a smile and wrapped his arms around her waist securely, both of them looking up into the sky silently and watching as the sun began to set slowly, casting beautiful rays of orange against the village around them.

It was at that very moment that Harry could not have cared less who would have walked in on their secret meeting place right now and saw them both sitting there in such a compromising position... Whether it was Draco or Pansy or Prof. Snape or even AJ herself...

Somehow, deep inside him, he knew that his twin would understand him... She would understand that he, as much as he didn’t want to admit it to himself, he had grown to love Hermione was much as he loved AJ... In a different sense of course...



Now, he knew that he could no longer deny that simple fact but facing it was a different story altogether... He loved her... He loved Hermione as much as life itself and he knew she felt the same but... Would this relationship have any future at all?

Harry Potter, the worst of the notorious boys in Slytherin, the most feared and powerful boy in the school... the handsome playboy and arrogant jerk... *and* Hermione Granger... The perfect student.. The perfect Gryffindor... The perfect friend...The perfect *everything*...

Hermione was *nothing* like him at all... She was innocent, carefree, pure... She was everything he would have *hoped* to be but wasn't. It seemed as though everyone would find it easy to love someone like Hermione... She was not only beautiful but smart... Courageous... Daring... Noble... And.. She was *sweet*... The nice, pretty and smart Gryffindor...

*With the nasty, horrible, Slytherin jerk... What a laugh everyone will get out of that...* Harry thought sarcastically, his eyes flashing in righteous anger at his own thoughts.

Even now, he could already tell what everyone in the corridors was going to say about them as a couple... And what hurt the most was that he had no choice but to agree with them because they would all be perfectly true...

*"How could such a nice, beautiful girl like Hermione ever like such a jerk like that? What does she ever see in him? She deserves so much better...He'll only hurt her..."* Harry shut his eyes to drown out the painful words. *They'd be right you know... I hurt her so many times already... I'll only end up hurting her again and I know it...* He thought sadly, watching as the sun finally set in front of them, the beautiful rays fading away slowly.

*If only AJ would wake up soon... I just need someone to talk to about this...* He thought heavily, not seeing Hermione, who had looked up at him and leaned forward, giving him a soft, tender kiss on the cheek.

Harry blinked, dazed, and looked at her questioningly, his eyebrows fusing together curiously as Hermione blushed, laughing at herself.

“Oh.. Well... Sorry about that Harry but see... There’s this saying that whenever you see the sunset with the person you love, you should take the opportunity to kiss him or her because if you do, then that person is bound to love you back.” She said, blushing darker.

Harry smiled back at her, trying to ease her nervousness as he tilted her face towards his again, using a single finger to trace her lips very gently, almost as though he was afraid they would break if he pressed too hard.

Hermione’s breath hitched in her throat when Harry let his finger trail down against the slender curve of her jawline, his eyes darkening with so much desire that they were almost black as they followed his finger intently.

Harry slowly trailed his finger down onto her neck, pushing away the strands of brown hair that had fallen onto the pale, smooth skin before leaning forward and retracing the trail his finger had left with his lips, kissing her neck very gently.

Hermione let her eyes flutter shut as Harry gently trailed his lips upwards on her neck, stopping for a moment just below the pulse point to press long, repeated feather-light kisses there before moving up and kissing behind her ear.

His eyes sparkling in mischief, he leaned forward and nibbled on the earlobe for a minute, causing Hermione to squirm instantly and open her mouth to protest but before she could get a word out, Harry had placed his own lips over hers, muffling out her words completely.

Hermione let one hand trail up and down his arm gently as she kissed him back in earnest, welcoming the familiar warmth she knew she could only find in Harry’s lips as they kissed each other gently, taking the time to caress the other’s lips and to savor each other’s own sweet taste.

They kissed sweetly and slowly, fueled by the love they knew they shared between them and by the innocent attraction they felt for each other, Harry surprisingly not demanding anything else but to have Hermione’s lips against his, willingly kissing him back.

Just as Harry tightened his arm around her waist, he deepened the kiss even more, pressing his lips onto hers and he felt Hermione's frail form grow weak in his arms, her body trembling and her hand tightening around his arm.

Thinking he had caught her off guard, Harry tried to pull back but he was surprised when Hermione instead wrapped both arms around his neck and yanked his face closer, deepening the kiss herself and surrendering her whole sense of mind to the passionate feeling.

Both their heads started to spin around in wild circles now but Harry couldn't care less, using one hand to caress Hermione's soft cheek gently, admiring the way her skin seemed to feel so soft against his own rough fingers.

Both out of breath, they broke the kiss, though reluctantly, and Hermione snuggled into his embrace again, sighing in contentment and closing her eyes, a soft smile on her face as she did. Harry stroked her hair, still panting slightly for air but he looked up at the sunset again, a small smile lighting up on his face.

The two sat in silence for a long period of time, listening to the calming sounds of the other's peaceful, rhythmic breathing and the sounds of the crickets beginning to increase in the silence around them, indicating to both that they should be heading back to the castle sometime soon. Finally, after a couple of silent, peaceful minutes, Harry spoke and broke the silence, his voice soft and barely audible, even in the silence around them.

"Hermione... I... I want you to come with me back to the castle to see my twin sister... I want... I want you to talk to her..." Harry said softly, pulling back to see the panicked look in Hermione's eyes.

"Oh but Harry... AJ and I... We never really got along well at all in the past... I doubt she is going to be happy when she finds out you've brought me to see her when she was under the effects of the potion..." Hermione said uncertainly, fidgeting around.

Harry laughed, shaking his head at her nervousness and giving her a smile of reassurance but it only seemed to make Hermione fidget around more.

“She’ll get over it... Besides... I know she probably doesn’t hear me but I’ve been telling her all about you... And us... And well... Who knows? You might end up waking her or something...” He said, shrugging but Hermione didn’t seem to like the idea altogether.

“Harry, you sister and I were *bitter rivals*! I don’t think she’d ever approve of me for you... I... Please, Harry, can’t we just—”

“*Please* Hermione? For me? I just want you to talk to her... It would mean a lot for me... for you and her to just... I don’t know, for me to just see you two together... *Please?*” Harry asked again, looking intently at Hermione, allowing her to see the pleading look in his eyes, causing her to groan inwardly.

*There they are... The famous pouty emerald green eyes...* She thought, looking at him in slight apprehension.

“Harry... I doubt she even hears what other people say to her in the first place... She’s *asleep*! I don’t think she understands what you say to her at all!” Hermione pointed out but the minute those words had left her mouth, she regretted saying them, seeing Harry’s eyes flash in anger and fury.

“You’re wrong! She *can* hear me! I’m her twin for Merlin’s sake! She can hear and understand everything I say to her asleep or not!” He yelled furiously, almost in a desperately hysterical manner, causing Hermione to wince at the flash of different emotions she saw in his eyes.

Sighing, she leaned forward and hugged him again, trying to ease his nerves as Harry clenched his hands into tight fists, glaring darkly up at the Hogwarts castle in silence. He couldn’t even remember being away from his twin sister for so long...Just the thought that she couldn’t even hear him made Harry feel even worse that he already had...

Hermione had just affirmed the thought he had been dreading all along this week... AJ couldn’t hear him... It was almost as if she really *was* in a coma... There was no way of reaching her at all... He was alone...

*Alone...* He thought, feeling his heart clench painfully as his eyes filled with tears of anger but they didn't fall at all, making his eyes glisten beautifully in the darkness of the afternoon.

Hermione seemed to sense his sudden change of mood as she sighed and pulled back, looking deep into his eyes with guilty, remorseful brown eyes of her own. "Harry... I.. I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that... I-if it makes you happy... Then fine, let's go talk to your twin sister, okay?" She whispered gently, caressing his cheek.

Harry just nodded wordlessly, his eyes looking distant and unfocused as Hermione stood up and pulled him to his feet, gathering her things on the ground into her bag.

"You want to stop by the *Three Broomsticks* first?" Hermione asked as she and Harry began walking back down the path towards the center of the village, Harry immediately tensing and looking around them suspiciously.

Hermione sighed as Harry barely heard her, taking the invisibility cloak out of his pocket and draping it around himself again, causing his form to disappear from view.

"I'm sorry, what did you say Hermione?" He asked distractedly but Hermione's eyebrows fused together as she looked around, not sure where Harry's voice was coming from or where she should look.

"Harry, would you take the cloak off? I don't even know where you're standing or where to look when I'm talking to you... People might think I'm talking to myself!" She said in exasperation, glancing around again wildly when she heard Harry's footsteps beside her.

She could almost see the smirk she knew Harry had on his lips as she desperately looked around her while they walked; causing some of the other students they passed by the village to eye her in amused interest.

"I just don't want to be seen, Hermione... Just try to pretend you're muttering to yourself when you're talking to me..." She heard Harry say from somewhere behind her, hearing the laughter and mirth in the Slytherin's voice.

Hermione muttered darkly under her breath, rolling her eyes and stalked off slowly, annoyed at Harry for putting her into such an embarrassing situation. "I was right then... You *don't* want to be seen with me... You're just ashamed of—"

She stopped when she heard a low chuckle and she felt a gentle feather-light kiss on the side of her neck, causing her to stop walking and blush darkly, looking at the spot she knew Harry probably was standing.

"You're such an emotional Gryffindor, you know that?" Harry teased fondly as Hermione felt the invisible boy's hand caress her cheek softly, making her smile briefly at the tender action.

"And you're such an inconsiderate, annoying Slytherin... But I'll bet you know that." She countered easily, hearing Harry laugh lightly again as she let her own smile light her face in amusement.

"I do... And besides, I meant I didn't want to be seen by *anyone*... Especially that Skeeter woman... The second task is just about up... I don't want her finding anything else about me." Harry mumbled, scowling under the cloak but Hermione sensed the dark tone of his voice as they headed off again.

She opened her mouth to say something but before she got the chance, they both heard a familiar drawling voice behind them, immediately causing her to stiffen in annoyance.

"Hey Granger... What the hell... Who are you talking to?! Your imaginary friend?!" Draco asked, smirking at her from where he was leaning against one of the walls of a shop between Crabbe and Goyle, watching the students passing by lazily.

Harry held back a laugh as he saw Hermione clench her hands tightly in irritation again, her brown eyes darkening in anger and malice as Crabbe and Goyle both seemed to find the situation hilarious and burst out laughing.

"Your friends are such...*happy campers*, aren't they, Harry?" Hermione muttered darkly to him, pretending she was cursing under

her breath so that the other Slytherins didn't notice what she was doing.

Harry couldn't help but grin, not saying anything to affirm her statement as Hermione just swallowed back her anger and continued walking, ignoring Draco's comment and the laughter that was emitting from the three boys.

"Aw... I'm sorry, was that supposed to be kept a secret?! I didn't mean to yell out loud to everyone in the village that you had an imaginary friend, Granger!" Draco yelled out again and this time, Hermione stopped, her eyes narrowing once more.

"Especially your *best friend*..." She added in a low hiss to Harry, shaking her head before they both walked on, ignoring the loud laughter they heard from the Slytherins behind them.

Harry couldn't help but laugh at the look on Hermione's face, reaching over and taking her hand in his, catching the girl off guard for a minute as she turned to look around for the invisible boy beside her.

"Aw come on, Draco's not so bad once you get to know him... He's just really an annoying prat... He's a great best friend though... He's just close-minded about the people he doesn't like." Harry reasoned, shrugging.

"I know Harry, I don't judge people that easily by how they act in public anyway. Take you for example, you were way worse than Malfoy ever was to me in the past and now, look at you." She teased, grinning as Harry mumbled something incoherent in response.

"I wasn't *that*—"

"You were *worse* than he was...Actually, you still are... You were even way more creative with your insults too... Ever a Slytherin..." She kidded and Harry laughed, smirking.

"You know you love it when I'm being the nasty Slytherin bad boy anyway..." He teased, smiling to himself and watching as Hermione blushed but smiled as well, not denying the comment.

"I don't know why I do..." She said, shaking her head at herself as Harry looked at her in surprise, his eyes widening at her agreement to his words.

"Ever since first year, I was always drawn to you somehow... Even though you and Malfoy were the biggest jerks and bullies around, I grew... Well...*fond* of you at some point... I guess it was sort of like a love-hate crush at the time." Hermione admitted, blushing and glad she couldn't see how Harry would have reacted at her confession.

Harry didn't say anything for a while as Hermione continued to lead them into the Three Broomsticks, both of them walking in silence before he managed to find his voice and speak up, a smile playing at his lips.

"So... You like it when I'm bad, huh?" He kidded, laughing when Hermione made to swat at him but hit nothing but air, her eyes narrowing in annoyance as she glanced around her in confusion again.

"You coward, where are you hiding now?!" She snapped, annoyed at the laughing she heard from behind her as she spun around trying to find the source of the Slytherin's voice.

"Well, well.. Look what we have here..." An annoyingly familiar female voice behind them spoke, causing them both to whirl around just outside the entrance to the Three Broomsticks to see Rita Skeeter, clad in ridiculously banana yellow robes, looking at Hermione curiously with a paunchy photographer behind her.

Harry instantly tensed and made to speak, forgetting about the invisibility cloak he was wearing but fortunately, Hermione spoke for him, her eyes narrowing in dislike at the reporter immediately.

"Trying to ruin someone else's life? Just like how you went after Hagrid?" Hermione asked coldly, glaring up at the heavily-made-up woman in front of her, her delicate features curled in dislike.

Rita Skeeter didn't even flinch, merely raising a thickly-penciled eyebrow at Hermione and glancing around the girl's surroundings, looking for the person the girl had been talking to.



“Now, now... Ms... *Granger*, wasn't it?” She asked, her eyes widening in recognition with her past article's featured person but Hermione didn't answer, just scowling at her silently in loathing.

“Our readers deserve to know the truth of course, Ms. Granger... Surely, they wouldn't want their children to be taught by a dangerous half-giant around school now would they? Now why—”

“Who cares if he's half-giant?! If he *was* dangerous, wouldn't he have attacked us all already by now?!” Hermione snapped pointedly, glaring at her but once again, Rita Skeeter didn't react, merely smiling a fake smile at her in response.

“Never mind that then... *Hermione*, why don't you instead tell me what an innocent, sweet little pretty girl like you doing all alone on a Saturday in Hogsmeade? Don't you have any friends? Or was your...*boyfriend*... busy?” Rita Skeeter asked, raising her eyebrow higher and glancing around, obviously searching for Harry.

Harry tensed beside Hermione, fearful that Rita Skeeter may also have the ability to see through invisibility cloaks but her eyes slid right past him, causing him to sigh out in relief.

“Harry Potter is *not* my boyfriend. You made that story up yourself about us months ago. What kind of sick pleasure do you get from twisting up other people's lives and then using it to destroy their reputation and sell the copy around for money?” Hermione asked in disgust, shaking her head at her.

Rita Skeeter's smile seemed to falter for a brief moment before it was back on again and she hastily gestured to the photographer behind her, taking a quill and a piece of parchment out of her purse.

“Well then, why don't you tell me exactly what *is* your relationship with Hogwarts champion, Harry James Potter? How do you feel about him? Come now, you must have known that he is one of the most eligible bachelors in the school and that most girls your age go crazy about him? And while you're at it, why don't you add in your relationship with his twin and how his twin is currently in her state of coma, as I heard—”

Hermione walked right up to her, her face burning with anger as she raised a hand and slapped the woman hard against her cheek, her eyes glowing fiercely and her features twisted into a hateful snarl.

“You horrible woman... You’d do anything for a damn story wouldn’t you?! Even ruin the lives of innocent people... No one deserves the kind of humiliation you give them by exposing personal matters of their life and twisting it like that! Anyone would do, wouldn’t they?! The Potter twins or Ludo Bagman or—”

“Shut up you silly little girl, don’t you ever talk about things you would never understand!” The reporter snapped, interrupting her as the quill and the parchment disappeared into her purse again and Rita Skeeter stood there, glaring at her.

“I know a lot of things, Ms. Granger... A *lot* of things but Ludo Bagman... About Dumbledore.. Hell, I even know more about the Potter twins than they know about themselves and they are all enough to make your hair curl...” Rita Skeeter hissed darkly, sneering down at Hermione in anger.

Hermione didn’t even bother answering anymore, just glaring at her silently, meeting her gaze before she turned and walked away, walking into the shop with Harry following after her silently, his whole form rigid with anger.

Just as he was about to sit down on the table Hermione had chosen, Harry looked back to where they had seen Rita Skeeter and saw that the Quick Quotes Quill was out once again and it was speeding hastily over a piece of parchment while Rita Skeeter watched it with a sadistic smile on her face.

“That bitch will be after *you* next, you know.” Harry whispered as he sat down the chair across from Hermione, the invisibility cloak still around him to avoid being seen by some of the other Hogwarts students in the small shop.

Hermione snorted, rolling her eyes as she flipped her hair over her shoulder and shot one last look on the said reporter before looking back at the empty seat across from where she knew Harry sat, raising an eyebrow in annoyance.

“Let her try... She'd better know better than to mess with me...” She muttered, an evil hint of malice in her voice Harry had never heard before and it made him look at her in surprise, a small smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

“I'm beginning to rub off on you... I like it...” He said, chuckling as Hermione flushed dark red in embarrassment before she stood up abruptly and made her way to the counter to buy a drink, leaving Harry laughing at her at their table.

**A/N: VERY** long chapter... I hope I clarified some of your theories about Snape in this chapter and I hope you were able to pick up all the clues. Oh and just so you all know and remember, that one line Hermione says to Harry: *“Oh.. Well... Sorry about that Harry but see... There's this saying that whenever you see the sunset with the person you love, you should take the opportunity to kiss him or her because if you do, then that person is bound to love you back...”* Is actually the same as Draco's own belief back in chapter 12. Just a little piece of trivia... **PLEASE REVIEW!**

## Chapter 25- The Second Task

“Harry, can you *please* remove the cloak? People are starting to stare at me...” Hermione asked him pleadingly, gritting her teeth in irritation as several seventh year Slytherins passed them by, throwing amused sneers in her direction.

Harry looked up and allowed a small smile to himself at Hermione’s rigid, fidgeting form, amused at seeing the Gryffindor tense and unsure of what she was about to do.

“That’s because you’re gorgeous.” He answered simply, hiding another smile as Hermione threw a dirty look at his direction, her eyes glaring like daggers at the chair opposite from her where she knew Harry sat.

“Harry, come on... No one is going to notice you here anyway... *Please?! People are beginning to wonder why I’m muttering to an empty chair across from me...*” Hermione pleaded again, trying to make it unnoticeable to the other students passing by.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but soon snapped it shut right after when he saw Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang approaching the Three Broomsticks, both hand and hand and both with happy smiles on their faces, much to Harry’s annoyance.

“Hey Hermione... What are you doing here all alone?” Cedric asked warmly as they passed by their table, throwing a curious look at Hermione, which she returned with a grimace-like smile.

“Oh... Well, I was just getting a drink, I wasn’t really going to stay long.” She answered, forcing another smile again as Cedric nodded and led Cho over to a table with some of his Hufflepuff friends, much to her relief.

As soon as the couple was gone, Hermione let out a breath of relief and set her cup of butterbeer down, throwing another disgruntled look at the empty chair in front of her.

“That’s it, Harry, take off your cloak right now! I don’t want to look like such an idiot anymore and besides, it’s not like anyone’s going to

care you're here!" Hermione exclaimed, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

Harry looked up just as a familiar group of girls entered through the door, trying his best not to jump up from his seat and strangle the one in front but instead, groaning out loud to himself.

"Oh yeah... Look behind you." He snapped sarcastically, pulling the invisibility cloak tighter around himself as Hermione turned to see Parvati Patil walking in the shop with Padma and several other Ravenclaw girls, a scowl on both the twins' faces.

Hermione instantly stiffened, trying her best not to be noticed but unfortunately, Parvati had already seen her, the girl's eyes narrowing for a split second before her face broke out into a mocking sneer, obviously pleased to see the other girl alone.

"Well if it isn't Hermione... Now what are you doing here all alone? Isn't *Viktor* around to go with you today?" Parvati asked in a sickly sweet voice, her face twisting into a vicious smile.

Hermione looked back calmly at her, her face not showing any amounts of her dislike for the girl as she easily answered the implied taunt.

"Unlike some people, Parvati, I don't find it necessary to always be in the presence of the male species." She answered before turning away, sipping her drink again as if nothing had happened.

Parvati's eyes flashed in humiliation at her but she didn't say anything, only glaring silently at the back of Hermione's head and restraining her twin with one hand, radiating with anger.

"I see... You only need to be in the presence of *one* particular male am I right?" She hissed dangerously, her eyes flicking from Hermione to the empty chair across from her, noticing the empty butterbeer bottle in front of it.

Hermione didn't flinch but Harry saw the look of panic flash briefly in her eyes as she met Parvati's withering glare, trying hard to ignore

the hateful looks Padma and the other Ravenclaw girls were throwing from behind her.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Parvati." Hermione answered calmly, her eyes betraying her calmness and unfortunately, Parvati seemed to notice this too as she smiled slyly and leaned forward to whisper something in the other girl's ear.

"Oh I think you do, Hermione... I think we're *both* the victims here... The only difference was that I was the first... You're only the *next* challenge... We're both about to make the same mistake of falling for this guy... The only question is.. How fast do you think it'll take *him* to dump you just as easily as he dumped *me*?" She whispered, smirking when she saw the look of shock and confusion in Hermione's brown eyes.

Harry watched Parvati whisper something to Hermione from under the invisibility cloak, his eyes wide and wary of what the girl might be saying to her as he remembered exactly what Parvati was capable of.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, her voice shaking and quivering, making Parvati and Padma exchange amused looks before Parvati leaned forward again, this time, not looking at Hermione but at the empty seat across from her.

"Oh come on, Hermione... You know as much as I do how many girls Potter has dated in the past... And *all* of them, he has dumped and used... As I said, we're both the victims here... Now how sure are you... That you'll be his last?" She hissed, keeping her eyes on the empty seat across from them.

Hermione's eyes clouded over as she listened to the other girl's words, knowing full well that what the other girl was saying was true, not knowing how to react to such a statement. Harry stiffened when he saw Padma lean in from Hermione's opposite side, bending down to whisper something as well.

"We're all looking out for you, Hermione. You saw how he got rid of Parvati here... People *don't* change you know... We can either be your allies... Or your enemies." She finished, a wry smile on her face

before she and Parvati both led their friends away, leaving Hermione in silence.

Harry watched, his eyes confused and questioning as Hermione looked intently at her half-empty cup of butterbeer, looking deep in thought about something the Patil twins have obviously said.

*How sure are you... That you'll be his last?* Parvati's voice echoed over and over again in her head as she glared grimly at the lion pendant hanging from her neck, almost as though she half-expected it to answer the question for her.

"Hermione?" Harry whispered, trying to call the girl's attention but Hermione barely heard him, looking distraught and distant as she repeated Parvati's words over and over again in her mind, slowly deciphering their meaning.

*She's right you know... How sure can I be that Harry has changed for the better now?* She thought, slowly tightening her hands into fists as she avoided looking at where she knew Harry was watching her.

Harry had said so again before... He's dated so many of those other girls in the past and *all* of them had been dumped without a second thought... How exactly could she have been so sure that Harry wasn't planning on doing the same thing to her?

She knew the Slytherin for about four years now... She knew him well enough to say that Harry Potter wasn't exactly Prince Charming... Sure, he had the looks, the charms and definitely the aura to fit the part but he wasn't the noble, loyal prince as in the fairy tales...

Hermione knew that to Harry, a 'relationship' only lasted a couple of weeks before he moved on to the next willing but very much unfortunate victim... She wasn't so sure if Harry was really serious about her at all or if she was just a temporary fling he was currently into but what if he got tired of her, just like all those other girls?

Despite everything that had happened between them, Harry was *still* a Slytherin...He was *still* the same boy she had known years back and he was *still* one half of the Slytherin duo in school...

“Hermione!” Harry snapped, finally breaking through Hermione’s thoughts and drawing her attention back to her as she finally blinked and looked up to meet the gaze Harry was throwing at her.

“I’m sorry... What were you saying, Harry?” She asked weakly, forcing a smile but Harry sighed and reached over, placing his hand over hers, startling Hermione in surprise for a second before she relaxed, her facial features softening.

“What did that bitch tell you this time?” He asked sharply, his eyes flashing dangerously in anger but Hermione squeezed his hand, trying to calm him down.

“Nothing, Harry... Let’s not think about it for a minute... We shouldn’t let her get to us... Just... Forget it... It wasn’t important.” She answered, shaking her head to clear her thoughts away, ashamed at herself for even considering Parvati’s assumptions.

*Harry loves me... He said so himself... He wouldn’t lie to me... He’s gone through all this trouble just to keep us together and he wouldn’t waste that all for nothing. I have to learn to trust him...* Hermione told herself, shaking her head.

Harry didn’t look convinced but didn’t bother saying anything else, only looking down onto his hands in silence, knowing that whatever it was that Parvati may have told Hermione, it was obviously affecting her very much for it to distract her like that.

Just as Hermione had told him, Harry had been avoiding Parvati all throughout the weeks now, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to control himself if he ever got the chance to see her up close.

Parvati, surprisingly enough, seemed to be maintaining a good deal of a distance from him either, not talking to him ever since the ‘dog’ incident but Harry saw her glaring at her when she thought he wasn’t looking, an evil intent flashing in her eyes.

Somehow, he could sense that his problem with Parvati was far from over... He only wished he had never gotten involved with her in the first place... She was nothing more than a whiny little waste of time.



“Harry? You want to get out of here?” Hermione asked, almost timidly as she looked up from her cup of butterbeer and Harry felt a huge rush of relief, immediately sliding his chair back so fast that people in the shop looked at the chair in suspicion.

“I thought you’d never ask... Let’s go.” Harry said, sighing as he followed Hermione out of the Three Broomsticks, making sure not to bump into the students walking into the shop as he passed.

Parvati watched Hermione walk out of the shop with piercing eyes, a cold smile on her face as she noticed the other girl’s worried, unsure features creased into an evident frown.

As soon as they were outside, Hermione led Harry behind the shop where the Slytherin immediately pulled off the invisibility cloak, allowing Hermione to see the scowl on his face.

Hermione winced but didn’t say anything, watching as Harry straightened out his robes and ran a hand through his damp, raven hair, a cold calculating look in his eyes as he did.

“What did she say?” Harry demanded sharply, giving her a sharp glare that could have pierced diamonds as he spoke, causing Hermione to look away and shake her head hastily.

“Nothing... I told you, it wasn’t important, Harry... Now come on, let’s head back to the castle to your sister—”

“*What* did she say?!” He hissed again, this time more fiercely as he stepped forward and grabbed Hermione’s arm tightly, pulling her to him so that they were looking each other right in the eye. Hermione avoided his gaze but found that she could not refuse to answer his question, feeling her heart give in to seeing the harsh, demanding look in the Slytherin’s eyes.

“She s-said I shouldn’t trust you... That you were only using me the same way you did her and... And that you were only going to play me in the end...” She whispered, biting her lip as she waited for Harry’s outburst but to her surprise, it never came...

She looked up, surprised when she saw Harry's eyes dropping down onto the floor, his grip on her arm loosening as he sighed and ran a hand through his hair again, Hermione noticing that it was *him* who was avoiding her gaze now.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise at his reaction, not at all expecting him to actually feel guilt or remorse after what Parvati had said about him. She had expected some kind of indignant, angry outburst from Harry but she hadn't expected him to react this way. It wasn't like him at all...

Hermione gently reached out a hand to draw his attention back to her, looking at him in concern. "Harry... What's wrong? Are you okay?" She asked but Harry flinched away and shook his head nervously, snapping his head back up to her with a false smile, his eyes looking masked and heavily guarded.

"Nothing, I'm fine... Why.. Why don't we go on up to the Hospital wing then?" He said, changing the subject abruptly with a false tone of voice, promptly shrugging Hermione's hand off and pulling the invisibility cloak out again, this time handing it to Hermione.

"Here... This time, *you* wear the cloak.. I think you've faced enough people for me already." He kidded falsely once again but Hermione wasn't buying any of it, giving Harry a confused look of concern.

"Harry—"

"Put it on then." Harry interrupted again, not wanting to answer her question as Hermione finally sighed, shaking her head before reluctantly draping the invisibility cloak over herself, making her completely disappear from view.

Harry didn't say anything else as he led Hermione out of the back of the shop and began walking back towards the castle, not bothering to answer the greetings of his housemates or his friends as he passed them.

Hermione followed several steps after him in silence, not knowing what to say to calm or to make the Slytherin relax and tell her what was wrong, her eyebrows fused together in confusion and thought.

She watched as several younger students cowered away at the sight of popular Slytherin but Harry barely paid them any attention at all, briskly walking back up towards the castle in quick, confident strides.

*Even when he has a problem, Harry is still 'Harry Potter'...* Hermione thought for a brief moment in amusement, shaking her head fondly at Harry's confident stride and movements, seeing some girl students in the village eyeing him as he passed.

Just as Harry was about to enter the castle, Ludo Bagman had cut right into his path, a beaming smile on his face as he looked down at the annoyed Slytherin in front of him in cheerfulness.

"Harry! How's my favorite Hogwarts champion doing?!" He boomed, smiling and not noticing the scowl on Harry's face as he looked at him, his features creasing in obvious dislike.

Hermione had to hide a smile as she watched the look of disdain on Harry's handsome face, obviously amused by the reaction the Slytherin had for the older wizard in front of him.

"You know you're not supposed to have favorites, Mr. Bagman... It wouldn't be right for a judge to have a favorite. It wouldn't be...*fair*..." Harry pointed out flatly sarcastically, a sneer evident on his face as he glared up at him.

Mr. Bagman looked undaunted however as he seemed to ignore Harry's cold tone of voice and shrugged, giving Harry a cheery smile in response. "Yes, well, I know that Harry but we all know that you're the shoo-in for the victory anyway, don't we?" He said, chuckling.

Harry cringed in annoyance but forced out an obviously fake chuckle as well, a rather sarcastic smile on his face in return. "I see... Well, what can I do for you then Mr. Bagman?" He asked in a voice of exaggerated politeness, impatiently checking his watch.

Bagman didn't seem to be in much of a rush however as he just laughed and clapped Harry on the back, causing the boy to wince in pain as the man had hit a rather delicate spot on his shoulder in the process.

"Well, I just wanted to congratulate you yet again on that magnificent job you did on that Horntail, Harry... Very well done I must say! You must be proud of yourself!" He exclaimed, smiling at him encouragingly.

Hermione saw Harry mutter something under his breath in annoyance again and though she couldn't quite make out the words, she knew it was something unflattering.

"Thanks..." Harry let his voice trail off as he followed Bagman's gaze towards something behind them, finally seeing a group of goblins watching them from a distance in the village, their beady eyes focused intently on Bagman's nervous features.

"Yes... Horrible aren't they? Been following me all day... Can't get a bloody word they're saying... I don't speak their language at all... Well anyway..." Bagman stopped talking and took out a handkerchief, wiping the beads of sweat forming on his face.

Harry smirked maliciously at the goblins, causing them to flinch and cower away, much to his surprise, almost as though they were scared of him somehow but Bagman didn't seem to notice.

"What do they want?" Harry asked curiously as Hermione silently walked over to them to hear what they were saying, her eyes sparkling in keen interest and curiosity.

"They...Erm... They were looking for Barty Crouch... He should have been at the Ministry but he's stopped coming to work... Absent for a lot of days now... Young Percy Weasley says he's ill and that he's just sending instructions to him by owl... Though, I'd appreciate it if you don't mention that to anyone... I don't want that Skeeter woman getting anything on us." Bagman whispered, shaking his head.

"Ask him if he's heard anything about Bertha Jorkins..." Hermione hissed at Harry, causing the Slytherin to jump in surprise for a split second before he recovered, looking back calmly at the older wizard.

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins so far?" He asked, rolling his eyes secretly to himself at Hermione's sudden curiosity at the uninteresting topic.

He had only heard about Bertha Jorkins once and that was from Sirius when he had talked to him, AJ and Draco before the first task and frankly, the witch's disappearance was of little concern to him right now.

Bagman's cheerful face suddenly looked weary, wiping his face and looking around to make sure they weren't being heard.

"No... We *have* got people looking for her but it seems she's vanished somewhere in Albania... But, what the hell, why are we talking about such rubbish like Bertha or Goblins? I wanted to ask you if you needed any help with your golden egg." Bagman interjected, surprising Harry with the abrupt change of topic.

"Er.... I don't think so, Mr. Bagman... I've got it under control." Harry said in mild indignation, looking at the man as though he had just turned into a giant blast-ended skrewt.

"Are you sure? Because I'd like to help you, Harry... I really would, see... I know how hard it must be to be in the tournament without having really volunteered for it so... If you need any hints or clues... Just say the word, Harry." He said, giving the Slytherin a wink.

Hermione accidentally let out a gasp of shock, causing Harry to look up in panic just as Bagman suddenly looked around suspiciously, his eyes widening in alarm.

"Who's there?! Is someone there?" He asked suddenly, looking around in a frantic manner but Harry cursed under his breath, causing Hermione to cover her mouth sheepishly before he looked back at Bagman, looking perfectly calm and nonplussed.

"It was probably just the wind, Mr. Bagman... I didn't hear anything.. Thanks anyway, Mr. Bagman but I think I'm doing fine by myself. I don't need help." Harry said stiffly, raising an eyebrow at Bagman's slightly disappointed look.

He didn't get to say anything else however, as the Weasley twins suddenly exited from the Hogwarts castle, cutting right in between Harry and Bagman.

"*Weasleys...*" Harry said in disdain, wrinkling his nose all of a sudden as Fred and George just looked back at him threateningly, causing the Slytherin to sneer back but nevertheless, take a step backward, knowing full well what the Weasley twins were capable of doing.

"Get lost, Potter, you slimy git... Anyway, Mr. Bagman, can we buy you a drink?" Fred asked, giving Bagman a fake, mischievous grin which Bagman returned with a hasty shake of his head, still affronted from Harry's refusal.

"N-no, I don't think so, boys... Anyway, must be off, good luck Harry." He said, nodding at Harry once again before he headed off back towards the village, Fred and George trailing after him with scowls on their faces, pushing past Harry as they passed.

"Hey, get your slimy hands off—"

"Sod off, slimy Slytherin retard!" George interrupted, laughing as Harry turned a dark shade of red and attempted to go after them but Hermione secretly held him back, looking annoyed.

"Let it go, Harry... Remember, Malfoy isn't with you right now, you could get creamed by yourself against Fred and George." She whispered to him, causing Harry to scowl but nod, rolling his eyes as he headed off into the castle, his robe swishing behind him.

She watched him fondly for a brief moment as she rolled her eyes at the now familiar action, annoyed and amused at the same time at his antics. Hermione shook the thought away and walked faster after him, following him back inside the castle as he entered and trailing after him slowly as he made his way to the Hospital wing, his robes still swishing dramatically behind him as they rounded every corner.

She kept a close distance behind him as Harry finally knocked on the door to the hospital wing, looking around to make sure no one was there before gesturing for Hermione to take off the invisibility cloak. Though slightly reluctant, Hermione slipped the cloak off her and walked towards him as he entered the hospital wing, looking nervous as she wrung her hands together in anticipation.

Harry took her by the hand and led her over to where his twin sister was at the end of the room, pulling back the white curtains that had been drawn around her and finally allowing Hermione to see her once rival lying on the hospital bed. Hermione's eyes widened when she took in the other girl's form, knowing that besides Harry, Draco and Blaise themselves, she was the only other student who has had the chance of seeing her up close like this before.

Now, as she saw the other girl up close, she couldn't help but forget about all the childish rivalries and competitions they had in the past and see AJ Potter for the first time in her life without the mask on...Just like Harry, she saw that she had somehow... *misunderstood* AJ...

As she was seeing her now, she looked like a frail, weak girl lying on the hospital bed, her features creased into a painful grimace as she slept, almost as though it hurt her even to sleep, and her breathing coming in short, irregular gasps.

Harry's eyes had widened at the sight and he bent forward and stroked his twin's hair gently, his eyes clouding over in worry in fear as AJ seemed to whimper something in her sleep, her forehead creasing almost in pain.

"She must be having some sort of nightmare she can't wake up out of..." Harry whispered, his face deathly pale as he took a wet cloth out of a water basin beside her bed and began to wipe his sister's forehead with it gently, Hermione watching him with a sad look on her face.

Leaning closer, she saw that AJ's hair had been pulled into a neat ponytail but for once, it had lost its luster and her usually delicate face was weary and pale, almost glowing in the darkness of the room.

But what struck Hermione the most was the expression she saw on the other girl's face... She didn't know why but somehow, she had gotten use to seeing the look of scorn or dislike on AJ's face towards her but seeing her in this whole new weak, helpless state was something new to Hermione.

It showed a new side of AJ that Hermione had never seen before... A little girl in her that Hermione knew was just searching for herself amidst the mask she wore around herself all the time... It was weird how she thought about it that way... She never thought she would be able to understand AJ at all....

Hermione sat down quietly on the bed, watching with softening features as Harry wiped his twin's forehead again and leaned over to kiss her scar, his eyes clouding over painfully as he began to sing a soft lullaby in her ear.

*"Shine bright morning light...now in the air the spring is coming...sweet blowing wind, singing down the hills and valleys...Keep your eyes on me...Now we're on the edge of hell...Dear my love, sweet morning light...Wait for me, you've gone much farther, too far..."*

Feeling her heart melt at the tender action, Hermione watched, teary-eyed, as AJ's pained features slowly began to relax at the soft sound of her brother's voice, a small weak but peaceful smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

Harry just continued to sing the painful yet beautiful words again and again to her, his voice almost too soft to hear but Hermione listened to every word, watching as Harry finally leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her forehead again, pulling the blankets over his twin.

"Where did you learn that song, Harry?" Hermione asked gently when Harry had stopped singing, startling the Slytherin in surprise for a minute before he shook his head, sighing.

"I don't know... AJ and I have always known it ever since we could remember... It was our own special lullaby for each other since we were children... I think...our mother used to sing it to us when she was still alive..." Harry whispered, his eyes looking cold and distant.

Hermione couldn't say anything for a minute, just biting her lip as Harry kept his hand holding his sister's motionless one tightly, his eyes looking far-off as though he was staring off into space.



“Do you... Remember much about your mother Harry?” Hermione asked again, reaching over and placing her hand gently on top of the hand Harry had wrapped around his twin, squeezing it comfortingly.

Harry blinked and looked down on the hand Hermione had on his own, inspecting it as though it was the first time he had ever seen it before he took it into his own, giving it a gentle kiss.

“Nothing... I wish I could though...Even if just her voice and the way she used to sing that song to us... Her beautiful voice... I... Sometimes, I think I hear it at night... In my dreams... When my mother comes to me... Or sometimes... I hear her in AJ’s voice whenever *she* sings our lullaby... It was always so beautiful...” Harry whispered, his eyes glistening with tears.

Hermione felt her own tear up but she refused to tear her eyes away from Harry, watching as he leaned forward and buried his head in his hands, a single tear slipping from his eyes down his cheeks.

“Do you miss her?” Hermione asked in a slightly timid voice, feeling ashamed at herself for asking such a personal question but Harry didn’t seem to react violently, only taking a shaky breath in response.

“How can I miss something I don’t even remember? I never knew her... the way she held me...Or rocked me in her arms... *Nothing*... But somehow... I can manage because... Because I’ve always found her in AJ somehow.... I find her warmth... Her love and her security whenever I’m in my twin’s embrace... It helps take away the pain...” Harry said, his voice a mere raspy whisper.

Once again, Hermione found she didn’t know what to say, fully aware that this was the first time the Slytherin had ever talked to her so much about their parents... Though, it touched her somehow at how Harry seemed to be opening up everything to her behind his mask... Trusting her completely...

*Which is why I should learn to trust him...* Hermione scolded herself silently, scowling as she remembered Parvati’s malicious words and shaking her head to clear them away.

"You... You must love your sister very much then..." She finally managed to say awkwardly, biting her lip as Harry finally pulled his face away from his hands and looked at her, his eyes looking about ten years younger than himself.

"She's the only one who ever really cares about me... She's all I have left..." He whispered, his voice cracking and his eyes tearing up again, blurring his vision as the emotions he had been hiding inside for weeks threatened to spill out from inside of his aching chest.

Hermione let her own tears fall as she opened her arms and allowed Harry to collapse himself into her embrace, not saying anything as Harry just buried his head into her neck, shutting his eyes silently.

"That's not true, Harry..." Hermione whispered, tightening her arms around him and burying her own face into his shoulder, rubbing her hand up and down his back in a soothing manner.

Harry didn't say anything but pulled back and stared deep into her eyes, looking confused yet frightened at her words. "What do you mean?" He asked, his eyes slowly widening in surprise.

"I mean... AJ cares about you very much... But she's not the only one..." Hermione said, suddenly looking very uncomfortable and dropping her eyes onto the floor in mild embarrassment.

Harry watched as Hermione squirmed uncomfortably again, her cheeks a dark red and her eyes focusing on anything else across the room except his own. A small smile on his face, Harry gently tilted her chin up to meet his gaze, his eyes softening as he watched her fidgeting around in nervousness.

"Do you mean that... *you* care about me?" He asked teasingly, managing a weak lopsided smile.

Hermione made to swat him gently but Harry caught her hand in midair, holding it tightly in her own as she spoke.

"Harry... you git, I... *I love you*... Of course, I care about you... Y-you know that already..." She said, now blushing darkly but Harry flinched away in guilt, looking away from her.

“Why?” Was all he said, not even looking at her when he spoke the words but Hermione’s eyebrows creased together in confusion, looking at him in question.

“Why?” She repeated, raising an eyebrow at him in inquiry.

“Yes, *why?! Why* do you love *me*? Or more importantly, *how*? How can you love someone like me?” He snapped bitterly again, a cold mocking sneer on his face as he turned to face her, his eyes glinting coldly.

Hermione blinked in surprise at the harsh question, not knowing what to answer to what he had in mind.

“After *everything* I’ve done to you so far... Everything I’ve done to you and your friends before and all those harsh, petty insults I’ve said... All those things... How could you have forgotten about them?” Harry asked spitefully, snarling at himself.

*Why exactly do I love him?* Hermione thought, trying to think of the best reason why she had fallen in love with the Slytherin the first place.

Sure, she could have given a lot of reasons why a girl would *want* to fall in love with Harry Potter... He was handsome, sexy, popular, powerful and charming... Basically, every girl’s dream but to give a reason to *why* she loved him was a different matter altogether...

Hermione couldn’t say she loved Harry because of all those qualities because frankly...Those weren’t the qualities she really loved about him in the first place... She’ll admit that those were the qualities that had *attracted* her to him but they weren’t the ones who made her *love* him...

She didn’t love his looks, or his personality, or his fame or even his money... She didn’t love any of those qualities and she couldn’t have cared less about either of them at all... She loved *Harry*... She couldn’t give an exact answer to his question if she spent the whole day thinking about it...

To be honest with herself, she really didn't know why she loved Harry... She just did... And that was a big enough reason for her altogether... She didn't need a reason to love someone...She didn't need a reason to love *him*...

"It's not a matter of how or why, Harry... I love you because...I just do... You don't need a reason to love someone or for someone to love you... You don't even need to question that person's love... Just accept it because it's there." Hermione answered calmly.

Harry felt his heart jump up into his throat as he looked up at her in shock and surprise, his eyes widening in disbelief at her answer, yet glistening beautifully in the silence of the room.

Ashamed at himself, he looked away, blinking rapidly and trying to stop the tears from flowing again as he made to cover them up with a laugh but Hermione had already seen them.

"Harry... What—"

"You were the... First girl to answer me that way... I wasn't... *expecting* that kind of answer... You caught me off guard, that's all..." He admitted, hastily wiping his eyes so Hermione couldn't see them, feeling his heart pounding rapidly in his chest.

Hermione smiled and turned Harry's face towards her own, her brown eyes full of warmth and understanding at his reaction to her words.

"Well, I *do* love you Harry... I don't honestly know why but I do... My heart just tells me I do...And you know that when a heart tells someone to love someone, there's no turning back." She admitted, caressing his cheek very gently.

Harry closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of Hermione's gentle fingers caressing his face, reaching his own hand up to hold her hand in his.

"Thank you..." He whispered, kissing her hand gently before opening his eyes again, allowing Hermione to see the sincere love and warmth in his eyes that she knew he barely ever showed to anyone else.

“For what?” She asked, confused as she pulled her hand away and met his gaze with a questioning look of her own.

“*Everything*... For seeing the real me... Not just the person everyone else thinks I am... I... I never thought I’d feel this way...*I-I love you*, Hermione... More than you’ll ever know...” He said, looking right into her eyes.

Hermione’s face formed into a beautiful smile, her eyes sparkling in happiness and her features glowing in warmth, returning the look Harry gave her with her own.

“Never... In my entire life... Had I ever imagined I would be hearing those words from *your* mouth, Potter...” She kidded, causing Harry to laugh in spite of himself, shaking his head at her.

Then, with a smile, Harry stood up and grabbed Hermione’s hand, squeezing it in comfort for a brief second before he pulled her up as well, leading her closer towards his twin sister.

Hermione watched, slightly nervous and edgy as Harry leaned over and took his twin’s hand into his free one, squeezing it tightly before he turned and gave Hermione a dazzling smile.

“AJ... Remember what I told you about the girl I had fallen in love with? She’s... She’s here right now...” Harry said, stroking his sister’s hair as he spoke, pulling Hermione closer towards AJ’s sleeping form.

Hermione didn’t say anything but watched as Harry guided both the girls’ hands he held in his own towards each other, allowing Hermione to feel AJ’s cold skin against her own.

“I... I promised you’d be the first to know remember? I know you’re happy for me... I’m in love with... With Hermione... She was the girl I had been telling you about before... I hope you understand me...” Harry whispered, leaning over to kiss AJ on the cheek.

Hermione didn’t know what else to do except to gently squeeze AJ’s lifeless hand, trying to somehow make it known to the other girl that she was willing to put everything in the past behind them.

Of course, AJ didn't respond at all but Harry gave her a smile at the gesture, his eyes looking tired but more alive than it had in weeks as his gaze riveted between both AJ and Hermione, the two girls he cared about most in his life.

There was no doubt about it... He was definitely in love with Hermione... No matter what Draco was going to say or how he was going to react, he couldn't go through with the bet any longer... He knew what he had to do...

"Hermione... Would you... Would you have dinner with me in secret the night after the second task? There's something... There's something I have to tell you... I... I need to see you alone..." Harry asked, looking intently into her eyes.

Hermione's eyes sparkled in curiosity and excitement but she held it back and smiled, nodding before she reached over and took Harry's hand in hers again to reassure him.

"I'd love to, Harry... I... I have something to tell you too, I uh... Well..." She blushed instantly and looked away, suddenly very much interested at the white walls of the room, much to Harry's amusement.

"What is it?" He asked, using his free hand to turn Hermione's face towards his again, his eyes twinkling with laughter and mirth as he took in her uncomfortable frame.

"Y-you'll have to wait till that night... It's sort of a surprise, I... I want it to special... For the both of us..." She added, blushing even darker as Harry fused his eyebrows together in thought, wondering what it possibly be to make Hermione blush like that.

"Okay then... Well... Would it be alright with you if we meet in front of the Prefects bathroom again? Then we could have dinner in the Slytherin pool house I showed you before... And don't worry; I'll prepare everything of course." He added, smirking at her.

Hermione laughed and shook her head at him, looking amazed and touched at the same time. "I'm beginning to think you're trying to bribe me with all these expensive gifts and dinners, Potter..." She kidded, leaning over and placing a kiss on his cheek.

Harry gave her a reckless grin but shook his head, leaning forward and capturing her lips in a searing kiss that left no room for words, both their eyes fluttering shut as they kissed earnestly, seeking the comfort and the love they knew the other had.

When they had parted, Hermione smiled and leaned over to place her lips over his again, savoring in Harry's sweet taste before she smiled and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest.

"It's a date..." She whispered before her eyes had fluttered shut, sighing in contentment when she felt Harry's strong arms wrap around her again, pressing her slender form closer onto his lean one for warmth.

*Let's hope so...* Harry thought fearfully, shutting his eyes tightly as he felt his heart start pounding painfully in his chest at the thought of how Hermione was going to react when she finds out about the bet.

*I can't afford to hurt her again...*

Draco leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on the forehead of the frail, motionless girl lying on the bed in front of him the next day, stroking her cheek gently, his other hand holding hers tightly as though he was afraid of letting go.

Harry watched him from across the room where he was silently studying for Potions but his mind wasn't anywhere near the book in front of him as he watched Draco intently, wondering how he was ever going to call off the bet he and Draco had long been anticipating ever since.

Draco didn't seem to notice Harry's uncomfortable state as he continued to stare silently at AJ's face, marveling at the softness of the features yet at how every inch of her seemed to portray a sense of innocence that he had never seen in anyone else before.

A sad smile on his face, he reached over and tucked a strand of long hair behind her ear, exposing the scar on her forehead that seemed to be the only mark that tainted her beautiful face.

"You're missing out a lot in class you know... I'll bet you'd freak about that..." Draco kidded lightly, squeezing her hand again as he spoke, Harry listening to him from where he watched in silence.

"I have to admit though that Prof. Grubbly-Plank seems to be a much worthwhile teacher than that oaf, Hagrid... I've actually been learning from Care of Magical Creatures." He said, smirking as Harry visibly stiffened from across the room and glared at Draco threateningly.

"Of course, those Gryffindor losers mostly miss the giant oaf for some strange reason... It's kind of fun watching them squirm whenever I taunt them about their half-breed pal—" Draco stopped when he saw Harry's eyes flash dangerously again, taking the hint and changing the topic abruptly.

"Anyway... The second task is just about to come up... let's hope your idiot of a brother has solved the clue, huh? I'm sure we're all clamoring for a Slytherin victory." Draco said, throwing a grin at Harry which he returned with a glare.

"Of course nothing much has changed... Well... Maybe I should mention that those Hufflepuffs seemed more scared now than they were before of me and Harry ever since the Yule Ball incident... Zabini seems to have laid off most of them though... The loser..." He said in disdain, a mocking sneer on his face.

Harry couldn't help but chuckle in agreement across the room, shaking his head as he continued to listen to Draco rant on about what had happened, knowing AJ would have reacted violently if she had been awake.

"Can you believe that Hannah Abbott actually had the nerve to come up to the Slytherin table and *slap* me?! I didn't do anything to her... I was only pointing out how *miniature* she was with her height... And she dared to bloody *touch* me!" Draco complained, rolling his eyes.

Harry snorted but didn't say anything, rolling his eyes at his best friend's childishness but Draco ignored him, sighing in mock exasperation.



“Anyway, enough about *them*, you should have seen how bloody disgusting those two have been acting lately... *Zabini and Abbott*, the school’s newest bloody couple... *Disgusting*... Almost as bad as Weasley and Brown—” Draco stopped and looked at AJ, immediately wishing he hadn’t mentioned Ron at all.

Harry looked up at him in curiosity while Draco leaned forward to whisper something to AJ, making sure Harry couldn’t hear whatever he had to say.

“AJ... Weasley’s been spending a lot of time with Brown for weeks now... I didn’t know how to tell you but...” Draco let his voice trail off, looking away painfully as though he didn’t have the strength to continue.

Instead, he coughed and put on a fake half-smile again, his face suddenly looking weary and worn out. “But... As I said, let’s not talk about them... I know how—”

“Draco?” Harry interrupted, looking up from his Potions book to meet Draco’s startled gaze, his eyes strangely glowing dark with a twinge of iniquity evident within the emerald green orbs.

“What, Harry?” Draco asked curiously, looking up at him but keeping his hand firmly clutching AJ’s, his eyebrows coming to meet each other in confusion.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately... There’s something I didn’t tell you... See... The night AJ was attacked...” Harry let his voice trail for a short moment when Draco stiffened but nodded for him to continue, keeping his eyes devoid of any emotion whatsoever.

“Well... I saw Barty Crouch rummaging around in Snape’s office... Looking for something... And then after that, Prof. Snape turns up saying that he’s lost *the draught of endless sleep* potion—”

“So you’re saying Mr. Crouch was the one who attacked AJ, Harry?” Draco asked sharply, interrupting Harry as he stood up hastily from where he sat, causing Harry to blink in surprise.

Harry's eyes had darkened in cold, twisted anger again but surprisingly, he remained seated on his chair, his form tensing and radiating a form of power that Draco had never seen in him before.

"I don't know, Draco... And frankly... I couldn't care less if he attacked her or not... *Someone* will pay... I don't care if it's him... Or Voldemort... Or any other bastard out there..." He hissed, ignoring Draco as he winced at the mention of Voldemort's name.

"So what are you saying exactly, Harry?" Draco asked, confused as he slowly sat back down, reaching over to reclaim AJ's motionless hand tightly in his once again.

"I'm saying... We ought to go back to the Library sometime soon... It's been a while since I've opened a dark arts book... I was beginning to feel a bit vulnerable without it..." Harry drawled lazily, calmly shutting his Potions book on his lap.

Draco winced again, looking up and giving Harry a look as though the other boy had gone crazy.

"Harry... I don't know if I'm still up for this... My father *did* warn us about the dark arts for a reason... Don't you remember? He said that we shouldn't rely on the dark arts for *anything* and that though it was a powerful sort of magic, *nothing* good really came out of it..." He reasoned, shifting around uncomfortably.

Harry snorted, raising an eyebrow at him in disdain and obvious shock. "What? Are you actually wimping out on me, Draco?" He mocked, a sneer on his face. Draco sighed but shook his head, running a hand through a sleek mass of silver-blond hair.

"No, Harry, I'm just saying we should be careful. We shouldn't addict ourselves to the dark arts too much... being addicted to the dark arts can drive a person to insanity. We should just know our limits.. Wizards have gone either crazy or evil by immersing in books like these." He explained, looking cautious.

Harry smirked, looking amused by Draco's uncharacteristic fear. "What's this, Malfoy? Are you scared? Is wittle Drakkie afraid of the

big bad dark magic?" He mocked again, sniggering as Draco flushed red in anger.

"Sod off, Potter! You know I'm not scared! I was just making sure you knew what we're getting into before anything... I'm just as anxious as you are about learning the dark arts! My father has already agreed to give us private lessons during the summer... What exactly did you have in mind now?" Draco asked, returning Harry's smirk.

Harry's smirk grew even wider and his eyes filled with an undeniable sort of rage as he turned away and glared darkly at the floor, his fingers slowly closing themselves until they formed a deathly angry fist.

His thoughts flew back to the thick black book he and Draco had seen several months ago in the library, remembering how the book had burned painfully into his hand and had thrown him across the room in a violent fit of rage.

There was no doubt about it... *Something* was in that book... *Something* that had been calling out for him in a strange, eerie way that made his skin crawl and yet his fingers ache to touch its pages...

It was almost as if the book was hiding something from him that he had yet to find out within its pages... And just seeing Harry was enough to make the book itself come to life and emit a sort of strange, drawing aura around it that brought him to the book in the first place...

But somehow... it was almost as if he wasn't meant to find out what was in the book for some reason.. Like even the book itself was afraid of him uncovering the secrets of its pages and it was driving him completely mad with curiosity...

How that silver serpent had flashed right at him... Almost in a familiar way as though it recognized who he was and was trying to call out to him somewhat... *Something* was in that book.. Something *powerful*... He didn't know what it was yet but he was very much willing to find out...

He wanted something... *Anything* to take his mind off the pain... Off all the pain he was feeling right now... Only the rush of learning and taking all of the dark magic and spells into his mind seemed to be the only way to remove the pain...

He hadn't told Draco but sometimes, late at night, when everyone had been asleep those past couple of days, he had taken the liberty of sneaking out to the library and reading to himself in the restricted section but he had never touched that book again...

Up until now, he had been afraid of coming near of for some reason... He was afraid of it as he remembered how it had glowed and burned in his hand before... It was weird though... Like he wanted to open it but he couldn't...

*Something* in that book terrified him... He could sense it in the aura around it... Something was definitely there... Something that made his skin crawl and the hairs on his neck to stand up in unease...

So he avoided that book altogether and had focused on the other dark arts books, reading and digesting it as much as he could and when he found that he had read all of them, he began moving on to the more advanced books, surprised at himself that he could understand such complicated spells and curses...

Somehow, he was beginning to crave learning those books like an addiction... The more he learned, the more he wanted to learn... He couldn't tear away the image of his twin all bleeding and deathly pale on the hospital bed again... He had to make sure that wouldn't happen again...

He had to make sure it would *never* happen again... Not to AJ... Not to Hermione... Not to anyone ever again... he had to find a way to stop it or to defend himself... he had to find a way to fight back.. And he knew the only way to do that was to beat them at their own game...

*Beat them all at their own fucking game...* He thought darkly, a sinister smile on his face as he thought of all he had learned so far, knowing by far that he was now probably the darkest student in the year.

*If Voldemort and his death eaters want a war... Then they'll get a fucking war... I'm not about to take this all as a defenseless, weak piece of worthless crap... I'm much powerful than he is... I 'will' be more powerful than he is... All I need is time...* He thought, his eyes looking scarily maniacal.

The dark arts would be the only way... The only way to fight back... And he would gladly succumb to it all for the chance to fight back... For the chance to protect his sister... His friends... And... *Hermione...* he thought, his eyes clouding over at the thought of the Gryffindor.

It was the only way of ever having a chance to win... to play by their rules.... He didn't care what Dumbledore had told him about the dark arts not being a solution to anything... In his opinion, the dark arts *were* a solution to every *fucking* thing in his life so far and he would gladly accept it to fight back...

*Voldemort was right all along... There is no good or evil... There is only power...* He thought darkly, his eyes so dark with evil now it was almost as black as night, his whole form tense and visibly shaking.

"Harry?"

Harry jumped, startled, wand clutched tightly in his hands as he whirled around to face Draco's concerned face, his silver eyes looking dazed and confused as he stared at him. "Are you okay? You completely zoned me out... What were you thinking about that got you all pale like that?" Draco asked, giving him a nonplussed look.

Harry shook his head hastily, forcing a nervous laugh out to mask his thoughts. "Nothing, Draco, I'm fine... I—Forget I ever mentioned it... Maybe we'll talk about it another time, that's not important right now." He rushed out, running a hand through a mane of raven hair.

Draco still looked highly suspicious, his forehead wrinkled in thought and his eyes filled with keen interest but he took the hint, nodding and turning back to look at AJ's face.

Harry watched him again as Draco gently took another wet towel out of the basin of water beside the bed and began wiping AJ's forehead, his hand lingering for a long time on the side of her face.

Harry's blinked rapidly, his vision blurring as he briefly saw the image of Draco and his sister transform into a similar image of him and Hermione, causing him to shake his head and stand up abruptly in surprise.

"What the—" He exclaimed, eyes wide in shock and disbelief as he blinked up at Draco, who was now looking at him with an expression as though he had gone absolutely insane.

"Potter, what is *wrong* with you?!" Draco snapped, looking terribly annoyed as he narrowed his eyes at him in question.

Harry wiped his face with his hand, resting it on his chin in thought just as he slowly sat back down on his seat, his eyes fluttering shut in concentration. *Just tell him... Just tell him dammit and get the thing over with...* Harry thought, taking a huge breath of air before he opened his eyes again, looking directly at Draco with a grim look on his face.

"Draco, there's something I have to tell you..." Harry started, biting his lip as Draco looked up and arched an eyebrow at him, giving him a lazy smirk.

"What is it now, Harry?" He drawled, yawning before he shifted his position and sat down on the bed right beside AJ's motionless form, leaning comfortably against the headrest of the hospital bed with AJ's hand still tightly held in his own.

Harry shut his eyes again momentarily, muttering a number of unflattering words under his breath before he opened them and stared directly at his best friend's curious face.

"Well, actually, it's about Gra—"

Harry never finished what he was about to say when they heard a loud knock behind them, causing Draco to stand up abruptly and raise his eyebrow at the door just as it swung open.

Then, almost instantly, Draco's face twisted into a hateful snarl of anger, seeing Ron Weasley enter and peer around the room, easily mirroring the scowl on Draco's face.

"What are *you* doing here, Weasley?" Harry asked rudely, seeing that Draco was too angry to manage to say anything, not relinquishing the tight grip he now had around AJ's hand.

Ron looked cautiously between the two of them but stepped into the room, his gaze lingering for a long time on AJ's unmoving form, an unreadable emotion evident in his warm blue eyes.

"Actually, Potter, Prof. McGonagall sent me here to pick up Malfoy. I'm supposed to bring him to her office right now." Ron answered, snapping his gaze suspiciously back at Harry as the Slytherin came up behind him with a sneer.

"Really now, Weasley? Now why on earth would she send *you* to pick *me* up? Give me a good reason to actually go with you... I don't find the thought appealing at all." Draco drawled with a sneer as Harry chuckled in amusement.

Ron felt his ears grow red but he bit his anger back down, not wanting to do anything drastic in the hospital wing with *two* Slytherin enemies in the room. "Sod off, Malfoy! She said it was urgent and if you don't want to go then I won't force you... It's not *me* who's going to get in trouble for it." He retorted, scoffing.

Draco narrowed his eyes at him but couldn't say anything in response, his scowl growing as he growled something under his breath but hopped off the bed, rolling his eyes to himself.

Ron watched in irritation, visibly tensing and seething with anger as Draco slowly leaned over and placed an affectionate kiss on AJ's cheek before putting the hand he held to his lips and kissing it as well.

Then, still acting as though Ron was not even in the room, Draco walked over and whispered something sarcastic to Harry, causing the both of them to burst out laughing and smirk at Ron's direction but they refused to say anything out loud.

“What? Too chicken to come over and say whatever it is you have to say to my face, Ferret-boy?” Ron taunted, feeling his temper rise up again as he watched Draco.

Draco’s smirk faltered for a split second in embarrassment but he recovered quickly and placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder to hold the other boy back from lunging at Ron, his smirk back in his place.

“Think you’re so clever don’t you, Weasel? I wouldn’t talk about animals if I were you... After all... It isn’t me who’s got the name of a *filthy* animal in their last name.” Draco replied derisively, causing Harry to snort in laughter.

Ron didn’t say anything but his face hardened like a mask as he stepped back and headed towards the door, not bothering to acknowledge the taunt with an answer.

“Prof. McGonagall is waiting, Malfoy.” He said coldly, shooting the Slytherin duo one more dirty look before he turned and looked at AJ for a long moment once more, causing Draco to stiffen in anger.

Before he could say anything else however, Ron had turned and had headed out the door, not bothering to close the door behind him as he left. Draco rolled his eyes but followed at a much slower, relaxed stride, patting Harry lightly on the back as he passed him.

“Look, whatever it is, tell me later Potter, I have to see what McGonagall wants.” He said, yawning again and before Harry could respond, he was out the door, his footsteps echoing lightly through the corridor.

Harry cursed to himself and sighed, sinking back down onto the chair and burying his face into his hands in exasperation. He had been so close in actually telling Draco the truth! Yet, Weasley had to go and ruin the opportunity like the many times he had done before... Man, how he hated Gryffindors...

*Except Hermione of course...* A voice spoke inside him wryly, causing Harry to redden and roll his eyes at himself. Plus, Weasley always seemed to have a knack for having the wrong timing... It was incredibly annoying... If only he hadn’t interrupted them...



*But then again...* Somehow... Harry was relieved that Weasley had barged right into the room during their conversation... It somehow gave him an excuse to himself to postpone telling Draco about Hermione since he was still slightly nervous about how his best friend was going to react....

He could almost see Draco's mocking sneer right now... And hear his voice speak out in that lazy drawl of his... *"You fell in love with the 'mudblood', Potter?! I always knew you were a pathetic fool! You're a weak little wuss, you know that?! You disappoint me... Completely whipped to a muggle-born Gryffindor... You're just as disgusting as Zabini! You're both weak, Hufflepuff sissies!"*

Harry winced and shook his head to clear the harsh voice away, feeling a rush of dread and fear overwhelm him as he thought of the possible consequences of telling Draco about everything...

There was so much at risk... So much he could lose just by this bet alone... Not only that but his pride would be damaged beyond repair... He wasn't so sure anymore if he could still pull this off... He was actually...

*Scared... I'm fucking scared...* Harry thought, biting his lip as images of possible consequences ran through his mind, imagining how everyone else was going to react when they found out that he was in love with his former Gryffindor enemy...

He wasn't like Blaise... He was never like Blaise was... He was a coward... And he knew it... He was brave at times when the situation called for him to be brave but when it came to matters of the heart, he was always a natural coward...

Maybe that was why he made such a great Slytherin... Because Slytherins, if anything, were natural cowards at heart... All with a powerful offense and defense but a weak, unstable center... That was a true Slytherin... And right now, those qualities were reemerging once again...

*Maybe telling Draco wasn't such a good idea... Maybe I should wait until the proper time to tell him... Maybe 'we' should wait before coming out in the open... People would never accept us as a*

*couple... We'd be exact opposites of each other...* Harry thought in dread.

Just the thought of seeing the faces of all his friends, his own *twin* even... He was scared... He didn't know how he was going to tell them..., Hermione was not only a Gryffindor but his former enemy as well... The initial shock would just be too much...

*So what the hell are you planning to do, wise guy?!* A voice inside him nagged, annoying him even more as he raised his head from his hands and stared around the silent hospital room in silence, lost in thought.

*Hermione would understand... We should keep it to ourselves for now... I'll tell her about... About the bet but I won't tell Draco anything yet... We need to lie low for a while... Just... For now...* Harry thought, sighing heavily.

Though he knew Hermione would not like the idea, it was the only way he could think of at the moment... And right then, he was almost ready to thank Weasley for interrupting them right at the exact moment he had almost told Draco...

*Maybe Weasley doesn't have such a bad timing all the time after all...* He thought in amusement before he blinked and looked up, hearing a faint moan from his sleeping twin in front of him. Sighing, Harry stood up and walked over to place the wet towel over her forehead again, marveling at how many nightmares his twin seemed to be having this week.

*If only I could have seen what she's dreaming about...* He thought, watching as AJ's forehead wrinkled, as though in pain, her form tensing in uneasiness. Eyes distraught and weary, Harry positioned himself right where Draco had sat beside her earlier and snuggled down next to his twin, wrapping both his arms around her in a warm, comforting embrace.

"What do you think, sis? Should I risk everything for this girl? I know you're the only one who can give me a definite answer..." Harry whispered softly, shutting his eyes as only the calm beating of his twin's heart answered him.

"I love her, AJ... What do I do about something as ridiculous sounding as that? For the first time... I'm finally in love..." Harry murmured again, his words now slurred by sleep as he yawned and snuggled closer to his twin sister, taking in a deep breath of air.

*Please wake up AJ... I can't get through this without you...* Harry thought sleepily before finally shutting his eyes and losing his consciousness into a deep, dreamless sleep, his head resting against his twin's shoulder.

"Harry Potter sir! Harry Potter must wake up, sir!" A high-pitched voice squeaked, piercing right through Harry's deep state of sleep as he grumbled something irritable and buried his head deeper into the pillow, yawning.

"Oh, please Harry Potter sir! You must wake up! You must!" The voice squealed again, this time accompanied with an annoyingly sharp poke right into Harry's ribs, causing the Slytherin to growl in irritation again.

"*Don't* poke me!" He snarled, not bothering to get up from the bed as he snuggled into his sister's body beside him, shutting his eyes stubbornly in sleep.

"But Dobby must poke, Harry Potter, sir! If not, Harry Potter will not wake up and he will miss the second task!" The high-pitched voice squeaked in panic, this time causing Harry's eyes to snap open, the emerald orbs looking dazed but shocked.

"*Excuse me?!*" He asked groggily, his voice heavy with sleep but dripping with annoyance and anger, causing the house-elf staring right back at him to wince in intimidation.

"Prof. Snape has sent Dobby to find you sir! It has taken Dobby a long time to find Harry Potter all around Hogwarts but finally he has found him here! Harry Potter must hurry up! The second task is in ten minutes!" Dobby said frantically.

Harry felt his eyes widen comically, feeling all the sleep and drowsiness drain out of him as he jerked out of the bed, his hand immediately reaching out for his wand on the table.

*“Ten minutes?! Ten minutes?!”* Harry asked, his voice cracking in panic as he fumbled around for his silver-framed glasses, hastily adjusting his robes and his clothes as he walked.

Dobby followed after him like a shadow as Harry literally ran around the room looking for his stuff, fixing himself up and muttering a brief spell over himself to fix his bed-ragged raven hair. Then without warning, he stopped abruptly, causing Dobby to crash right into his legs and fall down sloppily to the floor with a loud “oomph!”, the elf looking up at him in confusion.

*It’s too late... I haven’t got a fucking idea how I’m going to breathe underwater... I’ve been lazing around too much... I forgot...* He thought with sinking dread, feeling an uncomfortable churning in his stomach.

“What is wrong, Harry Potter sir? Sir must hurry! You must be down by the lake with the other champions by now!” Dobby squeaked, looking up at him with huge green eyes.

“No, Dobby... You don’t get it.. It’s too late... I... I don’t have a clue how I’m going to do the second task... I—”

“Harry Potter *will* do the task because Dobby will help him! Dobby has the solution to breathing underwater, sir! Dobby is getting help from a teacher!” He exclaimed proudly, causing Harry to gawk at him.

“What?! But *you* don’t know what the second task is all about, how could you have possibly—”

“Sir is need not knowing how Dobby is finding out, sir... Dobby did it for you, sir! He is getting help from someone else... You is to go in the lake and find—”

“The one thing I miss the most?!” Harry interrupted nervously, his head snapping back to where his twin sister lay on the bed, immediately feeling a huge wave of relief wash over him when he saw her sleeping peacefully there.

“Yes, Harry Potter sir! Dobby is seeing the captives, sir! They is taking Master Draco—”

“*Draco?! Is that why they called him earlier?!*” Harry asked in surprise, his eyes as wide as saucers with amusement as he imagined how Draco would react violently when he found out he was drenched in the lake for a long time.

“Yes, sir yes! One of the things Harry Potter will miss most, sir, is his best friend sir! *‘But past an hour’—*”

“*The prospects black... Too late it’s gone... It won’t come back...*” Harry interrupted, reciting along with him, feeling a sudden rush of panic rise up inside his chest.

“Who—”

“It was Prof. Snape who is deciding Harry Potter’s most missed person sir... He is not wanting sir’s twin to be taken in her condition, sir!” He explained, interrupting his question before he managed to get it out.

“Dobby, what am I supposed to do?” Harry asked, turning to the house-elf just as the elf pulled out something from his pocket which closely resembled, to Harry’s obvious horror, a ball of grayish-green rat tails.

“Sir must eat this! Gillyweed! It will help you breathe underwater, sir! Dobby is having a reliable source sir! But Dobby cannot say, he cannot say who is helping him sir but he can say that what he tells you is true!” The elf squeaked again, giving Harry a toothy smile as he handed the Gillyweed over.

Harry inspected the Gillyweed in his hand, suddenly looking green with disgust but he nodded and dropped the gillyweed in his pocket, the look of disgust still on his handsome face.

“Dobby is wanting to help Harry Potter sir! They is actually wanting to take sir’s twin but she is sick so they is taking your best friend instead... Harry Potter must hurry sir!” Dobby rushed out.

Harry didn’t need telling twice as he nodded and stuffed his wand into his robe pocket, immediately tearing out of the room with his robe swishing right behind him, Dobby at his heels.

"Dobby must go to the kitchens now sir! Good luck, sir!" Dobby suddenly yelled as they burst through the corridor, Harry finally seeing the long line of Hogwarts students heading outside to watch the task begin.

"Okay, thanks Dobby, I owe you one!" Harry replied back, pushing past the students, ignoring the exclamations and the excited greetings he heard directed at him as he wove his way through the crowd.

"Hey Potter! Make us proud!" A large group of Slytherin seventh years yelled at him as he rushed past them, causing Harry to briefly nod as he passed, hearing the loud cheers and catcalls behind him.

Harry cursed to himself as he checked his watch and ran faster, literally jumping off the steps and landing perfectly on the floor on one knee before rising up and tearing off again, the people now making way as they saw the champion fly by.

"Good luck Potter!" Several more of his housemates and other students greeted but Harry didn't have the time to see their faces, shoving past them now as he briefly had a glimpse of the seats that had been in around the enclosure in the first task now on the opposite bank of the lake outside.

Breathing heavily and panting for breath, Harry didn't notice a group of students there and crashed himself right into Pansy Parkinson, who in turn giggled and helped him up, giving him a coy smile.

"Heya Harry... Good luck out there... We'll all be cheering for *you*...Want a good luck kiss?" She asked, smiling at him and flashing him her pearly whites but Harry had already stood up and was now dusting his robes, sneering at her mockingly.

"Not from *you*, Parkinson." He retorted rudely, causing Crabbe and Goyle, who were among the group of Slytherins there, to laugh loudly, along with some of the other girls but Pansy seemed undaunted and tried to step closer to him.

Harry ducked out of her way and ran off towards the other champions, ignoring her angry exclamation amidst the hearty sniggers of the

other Slytherins just as Harry reached the golden-draped judge table at the water's edge on the side of the lake, nearly bumping into the other champions waiting there.

Cedric, Fleur and Krum all gave him a disapproving look but Harry returned it by arching an eyebrow irritably, breathing too hard to manage to say anything sarcastic to any of them.

"*Where* have you been, Potter? The task is just about to start and you arrive at *this* time?!" An annoyingly familiar voice snapped, causing Harry to look up and see Percy Weasley glaring down at him through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Sod off, Weasley, since when did I take orders from *you*? I never followed you as a prefect or head boy and I certainly will not follow you now. Besides, I'm *here*, aren't I?" Harry snapped sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

Percy's eyes flashed and he was just about to snap something equally sarcastic back when Bagman came up behind him and placed a proud hand on Harry's shoulder, looking incredibly relieved to see him.

"Now, now, Percy, let the boy catch his breath! He's obviously had quite a run going here." Bagman said cheerfully, not noticing the look of irritation on both Harry and Percy's faces.

Harry winced and moved away, shooting a curious look as he searched around for Mr. Crouch and failing seeing the judge there once again among the others. *He better be glad he's not here...* He thought evilly, a dark smirk on his features as a number of possible curses came into mind at that moment.

Then, blinking, he shook his head and cleared the thought away, looking up and shooting one of his practiced smiles at Madame Maxime and Prof. Karkaroff, who both had looked disappointed in his arrival.

Dumbledore gave Harry a warm smile which the Slytherin returned briefly before checking over the large crowd now seated across from them for a sign of lustrous brown hair among the students. Harry

managed to spot some of the Gryffindors in the crowd, seeing Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnigan in front looking surprisingly worried about something as they watched the scene in anticipation.

*What's 'their' problem? And where the hell is Hermione?* Harry wondered, frowning to himself as he promptly got into position with the other champions, nodding at the cheers he heard directed at him.

Krum gave him a strange look as he joined them, which Harry returned with a menacing glare, feeling his anger flare up immensely at the sight of the Bulgarian student.

Fleur however, looked extremely jittery as she fidgeted around every once in a while, nervously checking her watch to make sure they were starting on time just as Cedric stared off into space in concentration beside her.

"All right there, Harry?" Bagman asked, moving Harry farther away from the other champions as Harry barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes at him, nodding reluctantly.

Bagman gave him a wink before he stepped away from him and pointed his wand at his throat for a brief second, whispering "*Sonorus*" as his voice boomed loudly through the noisy crowd of students.

"Well then, now that our champions have prepared themselves, I'll explain the second task... All the champions have precisely one hour to recover what has been taken from them... So, on three then... One two, *three!*" He announced, a loud whistle immediately following right after.

Harry immediately ignored the other champions and calmly began taking off his glasses and unbuttoning his robes right then and there, much to the shrieks and squeals of the crowd watching them anxiously.

Underneath, Harry slowly peeled off his sweater and threw it aside, walking over to the lake's edge with the gillyweed in his pocket as he caught an image of Cedric performing some kind of spell beside him.



The crowd watched excitedly, particularly the girls, as Harry finally removed his shirt and took the gillyweed out of his pocket, a scowl of disgust on his face before he promptly bit into it, looking absolutely disgusted as he chewed.

The audience, especially the Slytherins, watched their champion silently, most of them looking confused as to why Harry was, compared to the other champions, standing on the lake's edge so calm and relaxed despite the given time limit.

Then, without warning, he began to shiver violently, now standing over the water from the edge, and before he knew what he was doing, his eyes had widened and he jumped into the water in a neatly perfect dive, feeling a desperate need for oxygen.

The feeling was incredible... It was like the minute he had dived into the water, he had taken in his first ever breath of life and the oxygen once again began circulating within his body, enough for him to notice the change in his form.

Harry's eyes widened as he slowly let his hand linger on the sensitive spot just below his ears... *I have gills?!* He thought in horror, imagining how stupid he must look right now with such a monstrous part added to him.

Stretching his hand out in front of him, he saw that the gillyweed had not only allowed him to breathe underwater but had also made his hands *and* feet webbed for better movement, much to his relief.

Looking around underwater, he didn't see a sign of the other champions but he found that he could see clearly, even without his glasses or contacts, and that moving underwater seemed easier than he had thought it would be.

His forehead wrinkled in concentration, Harry dived downwards deeper into the water, silence now more evident than ever as he briefly swam over a foggy landscape, his vision only allowing him to see a small portion of the lake as he moved.

Harry took his wand out of his pocket and whispered a spell he knew, causing his eyes to glow brightly for a moment before it settled back

to its original emerald green color but now, he was able to see clearly more around his surroundings even from a far distance as though his eyes had hidden light illuminating the scene before him.

Fusing his eyebrows together, Harry tucked his wand back into his pocket and looked around silently, taking in the deserted landscape and passing through several more long weeds resembling a dark forest underwater.

Feeling his impatience growing, Harry narrowed his eyes and was just about to speed up when something grabbed his leg under him, causing him to snatch his wand out of his pocket reflexively and snap his head to look at the creature under him.

Then, seeing the horned-water demon baring its teeth at his leg, Harry allowed a secret smirk to himself as he raised his wand over the Grindylow, already knowing the perfect spell to perform.

*I've always wanted someone to practice on...* He thought darkly, calmly pointing the wand at the Grindylow just as it was about to sink its teeth right into him.

*"Avada Kedavra!"* He yelled out only no sound came out his mouth underwater but a jet of boiling bubbles had erupted from his wand instantly, so strong it had sent him back a way from the Grindylow.

However, Harry's eyes narrowed angrily when the spell had only hit the Grindylow but had no effect whatsoever, immediately causing the Slytherin's eyebrows to fuse together in confusion.

*I don't understand... It worked for me before, dammit...* He thought angrily again, his face twisted into an angry snarl and his eyes burning with fury, wand clutched in a tight death grip in his hand.

He was just about to try the spell again when he felt a sharp, painful burning on his shoulder but before he could react, two more Grindylows had seized him from behind, causing Harry to start in surprise and nearly drop his wand.

*Damn pests...* He thought impatiently once more, raising his wand again and muttering a dark spell he had learned only recently before.

*“Mospherio Diatius!”* Harry somehow snapped in annoyance, this time causing an immensely bright green light to glow from his wand for a split second before it somehow exploded silently, bright green light spreading rapidly from his wand through the water, sending all the Grindylows crowding around him flying away violently.

Harry watched them with a scarily sadistic gleam in his eye before he blinked and turned back towards his original route, swimming now as fast as he could through the dark weeds in the water.

He slipped his wand back inside his pocket and shivered slightly, his bare arms developing goosebumps, now wishing he had not removed his shirt and robes, finally remembering the lake was coldest at the very bottom where he was exactly right now.

*I just had to show off huh?* Harry thought sarcastically, his black jeans being the only piece of clothing he had bothered wearing as he swam through the cold, dark lake.

“Heya Harry...Getting along so far?” A voice spoke out of nowhere, startling Harry completely as he jumped and whirled around, his eyes widening when he caught sight of Moaning Myrtle floating right behind him, looking fuzzy in the dark water.

He didn’t say anything out of shock but Myrtle pointed to a certain direction, giving him a shy smile. “I’d try over there if I were you... Though I never really liked those people...” She said, blushing under the Slytherin’s gaze.

Harry felt a wave of relief wash over him at being pointed to the right direction but he didn’t dare let it show, instead, winking at her and giving her a dazzling smile in response before he swam off, Moaning Myrtle watching him and actually giggling to herself.

He swam for about a couple more long minutes, finally feeling a rush of panic inside him as he briefly remembered the lines of the song he had heard before.

*“An hour long...But past the hour... Too late it’s gone...It won’t come back...”* Harry felt a sense of fear envelop him, briefly wondering whether or not the song actually meant what it really said.

*Dammit... Draco is going to kill me about this...* He thought but he couldn't help worrying now as he began swimming faster, his eyes searching frantically for a sign of any of the hostages or the champions around him.

Then, as though it in his thoughts, he heard the faint murmuring of the mersong again as he swam closer, the soft words echoing in the silent stillness of the cool dark waters.

*"An hour long, you'll have to look, and to recover what we took..."*

Harry began swimming faster once more, his face forming into a scowl as he listened to the annoyingly haunting mersong once more. *Rhyme...* He thought in annoyance.

*"... your time's half gone, so tarry not... Lest what you seek stays here to rot..."*

That did it, Harry literally sped up taking his wand back out of his pocket and holding it cautiously ahead of him, his eyes alert to any other creatures he may be meeting in his way.

Then, with a start, Harry stopped abruptly in shock and disgust, seeing several clusters of crude stone dwellings stained with algae suddenly loomed around him on all sides, revealing faces unlike Harry had never seen before.

If he thought mermaids looked like the mermaid in the painting in the Prefect's bathroom, he had obviously thought wrong because the merpeople he was seeing now looked *nothing* like that mermaid in the picture at all.

They were actually... There was no other word for it except... *Ugly... Ugly and Hideous...* With grayish skin and scraggly and stringy dark green hair... Yellowing broken teeth and brightly glowing large yellow eyes...

Harry stared at them, completely stunned and speechless, the shock and disdain evident on his handsome features as he glanced at each of them one by one carefully.

They all seemed to leer as Harry hurriedly swam past them in the water, his eyes never leaving their faces as though he was almost sure they were going to attack him once he had turned his back. Several of the merpeople swam out of their positions to watch him more carefully, their silver tails swishing gracefully in the water and their spears gleaming in their hands.

Harry sped through the small landscape filled with caves of merpeople in caution, gulping secretly to himself and shooting several a suspicious look which they returned with a leer once more.

Slightly exhausted, Harry finally saw what seemed to be the middle of the mervillage, a group of merpeople floating in front of a village square and singing as a choir the song to draw the champions to them. A large statue stood erect in the middle of the square.

Harry glanced at the statue and started in surprise when he saw the hostages all tied to the tail of the giant stone merperson, all of them looking in some kind of sleep-like trance that allowed them to breath underwater.

Frowning, he swam up them and finally saw that Draco right in between Cho Chang and a little girl with silvery hair even sleeker than Draco's, looking around eight years old in age.

Harry was just about to cut his best friend loose when the fourth person finally caught his eye, causing his heart to jump abruptly right into his throat in surprise, anger and panic all at the same time.

"Hermione!" He yelled out loudly but no sound came out of his mouth once again as he rushed forward towards her unconscious form, looking carefully at her and inspecting both sides of her face, making sure she was alright.

The merpeople around them watched in interest as Harry looked from each hostage to another, feeling a hot, burning anger rising in his chest as his eyes glazed a dark, malicious green, glowing brightly even in the dark water.

*Draco's my hostage... Fleur's is obviously this little girl... Cedric's is Chang... So... Krum...* Harry didn't bother finishing his own train of

thought, his hands tightening around his wand in anger as his face twisted into an angry snarl.

*Who the 'fuck' does he think he is?!* He fumed, his face now twisted into a hideous look of malevolence, causing some of the merpeople around them to back away cautiously.

*Hermione's mine... 'I'm' bringing her back with me...* Harry thought angrily, grabbing his wand and muttering a burning spell on the rope that bound Draco and then Hermione, intent on taking them both back up.

Just as he was dragging them with him back up towards the surface, one of the merpeople suddenly grabbed his arm, pointing his spear at Harry's chest in threat.

"Only *one* hostage... You take your own... Leave the girl." He ordered gruffly, indicating to Hermione but Harry's eyes flashed dangerously, his grip tightening around both hostages.

Before the merperson knew what was happening, Harry had gripped the spear tightly with his hand and had yanked it powerfully out of the merperson's grip, hurling it the other direction violently in rage, instantly causing uproar amongst the merpeople.

Harry ignored the loud shouts and violent reactions around him as he took out his wand again, whispering more advance spells he knew by memory, causing a protective shield to surround them and lightening the load he had to carry.

He watched as several weapons hit the shield and bounce back off towards the merpeople, immediately causing a riot as most of the merpeople assigned to guide the hostages began to move forward towards Harry.

*Oh no you don't...* He thought darkly, using his wand to mutter another spell, causing a jet of bubbles to erupt from his wand again, this time creating a dark mist around the water around them.

Several of the merpeople gasped and backed away in fear, allowing Harry to tuck his wand back into his pocket and attempt to swim off

but a large, rough hand suddenly snatched his arm out of nowhere, causing him to whirl around in surprise.

A fist came out of nowhere and collided right with his jaw, causing Harry to drop both Draco and Hermione and stumble backwards, clutching his jaw in pain and looking up at his attacker.

Krum's surly, scowling face glared right back at him in anger, startling Harry for a moment when he saw how Krum had attempted to transfigure himself into a shark, ending in a hideous result of having a horrifying shark head on him.

Harry barely prevent himself from laughing right then and there, instead giving the shark-man a sneer underwater but Krum barely noticed, swimming forward and seizing Hermione by the waist, pulling her away from Harry.

Harry reached forward and clasped Hermione's other wrist tightly, refusing to let her go as Krum promptly tried to pull her away from him with her other hand.

The merpeople watched, amused as the two boys angrily gave each other a dangerous and threatening death glare, both sets of eyes locking in a tense staring match and neither one relinquishing his hold on Hermione.

Hermione's delicate form jerked from one direction to another as Harry and Krum both held tightly to her hand, literally looking as though they were ready to kill each other right there.

Krum gestured wildly with his hands, indicating that Hermione was *his* hostage but Harry ignored him, his eyes so dark now that it was almost as black, his eyes resting now resting on the hand Krum had around *his* girl.

His eyes flashed maniacally and he made to reach for his wand again but a group of merpeople had finally restrained him from behind, allowing Krum to pull Hermione towards him, looking relieved.

As Krum swam back up towards the surface with Hermione tucked safely in his arms, Harry could only watch him go helplessly, his eyes

clouding over in jealousy and his hands tightening into tight, angry fists.

"Let go of me, dammit!!" Harry yelled out loud but nothing came out of his mouth except bubbles underwater, infuriating him as he tried to wrench out of their grasp, glaring as Krum swam out of his vision back up the surface.

*Hermione's who he'll miss most?! Who the hell does he think he is?!* Harry raged inwardly as the merperson holding him shoved him forward, his jagged lips curling into a leer.

"Take your own hostage and go." He ordered gruffly, sneering as Harry returned the look with a sneer of his own before he swam forward and grabbed Draco again, stopping abruptly to see Cedric Diggory finally swimming towards them.

"Got lost..." Cedric mouthed to him, shaking his head before he swam past Harry and began cutting Cho loose from the statue, taking the Ravenclaw and swimming out of sight as Krum did earlier.

Harry was about to go off after him when he stopped, seeing the small, silvery-haired girl again being the only one left on the statue, her face so pale it was almost glowing in the dark.

*Oh crap...* Harry thought, groaning to himself as he briefly glanced at his unconscious best friend, wondering how Draco was going to react when he found out Harry had played 'noble hero' once again and had rescued the little girl.

*You just can't leave her there! The hour is nearly up and Fleur isn't here yet!* A nagging voice inside his head exclaimed, drawing his attention back to the delicate girl as she shivered in the freezing cold water. Already, Harry could feel the annoyingly warm, fuzzy feeling of being a 'noble hero' start to bubble inside his gut, rising up in his chest.

*Forget it... She's not my problem, I'm going back up...* Harry thought, shaking his head firmly and swimming off but halfway through, he stopped again and cursed out loud, his features twisting into a disgusted yet defeat grimace.



Groaning loudly, he somehow knew he didn't have the mind to leave an innocent little girl all alone like that, even if he was a Slytherin and had a reputation to uphold... *Hermione is starting to influence me... I'm growing soft...* He thought for a moment, sighing as he thought about how very 'Gryffindor' he was acting at that very moment.

*Argh! Damn your conscience, Potter!* He screamed inwardly at himself as he angrily dragged Draco's form and swam back towards the little girl, ignoring the merpeople's exclamations as he cut her loose and dragged her with him as well, muttering to himself the whole time.

*I cant believe this... I'm actually developing morals...* He thought in shame, shaking his head as he dragged Draco on one side and the little girl on the other, both still immensely heavy and unconscious as he swam.

*I just hope she doesn't see me when she wakes up...* He thought miserably, sighing before he took the girl and hoisted her up on his bare shoulders, his hands too busy dragging Draco by the collar through the water.

Surprisingly, the merpeople had not chased after him for taking two hostages this time, watching him as he hastily swam back up towards the surface after Krum and Cedric, his eyes narrowing towards the light.

Somehow, he was becoming more aware of how uncomfortable the water felt inside his mouth now, the sides on his neck hurting painfully once again and his breathing coming in slow, ragged gasps for air.

Kicking his feet as fast as he could now, he felt them slowly transform themselves back into normal, causing him to slow down instantly, feeling the weight of both Draco and the little girl weighing down on him as he swam towards the light of the surface.

Then, all of a sudden, it was like someone had placed a small plastic bag over his head and he felt the desperate need for oxygen, his head starting to spin and feel heavy, the water now flooding his mouth, sealing out air.

He forced himself to swim faster, every nerve in his body screaming for oxygen and his vision slowly darkening, knowing full well that if he didn't break through the surface soon, he was going to lose his consciousness as well.

Every single muscle in his leg screamed in agony but Harry swam on, determined to reach the surface just ten feet above him, his brain now completely water-logged and his lungs throbbing with the need for air.

Harry felt a wave of relief when he broke through the surface of the water, taking in huge breaths of wonderful air as though he had never breathed properly before, the cool wind hitting his face. He looked up at the crowd watching him, hearing the loud eruption of cheers from the stands across and seeing the other champions already by the lake's edge, waiting for the results.

He could vaguely hear Bagman booming something loudly to the audience but he was too tired to care, panting heavily for breath as he weakly dragged Draco and the girl back towards the edge of the lake.

Harry looked over at Krum and saw him fussing worriedly about Hermione, who had just woken up, her hair and her robes dripping wet and clinging to her delicate body, looking annoyed as she tried to move away from the other boy. Sighing, she looked up and gave him a concerned look, which Harry returned with a dark, malicious glare, his eyes flashing and his face twisting into an angry snarl at her.

Hermione met his gaze with a genuinely confused and bewildered look, completely oblivious to what Krum was saying as she watched Harry sneer at her and turn his head away, his face still twisted into a mask of open jealousy.

He failed to notice Hermione's eyes drop in guilt, looking over to see Draco finally coming around, silver orbs opening up at him, allowing him to see the indignation, anger and humiliation within their depths.

Harry couldn't help smirking down at Draco's horrified face, raising an eyebrow calmly in response. "You don't look like someone who's

grateful for me saving his life, Draco.” Harry said calmly, sniggering when Draco had glared back silently.

His eyes narrowed in anger, he slowly stood up and ran a hand through his damp silver blonde hair, rudely spitting out a neat stream of water from his mouth right towards Harry, who backed away in disgust.

“Malfoy, that’s disgusting!” Harry recoiled, stepping back as Draco just glared at him, gesturing to his wet and drenched expensive robes.

“I didn’t *need* you to save my life, Potter! Hell, I didn’t agree to do this *hostage* thing in the first place! Someone just knocked me out from behind!” He snapped in righteous anger once again, glaring at him.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry burst out into laughter at Draco’s horrified face, collapsing on the ground and laughing as though he couldn’t control himself with humor.

The crowd across from them shrieked and cheered their support for Harry, some standing up on the stands to see the different merpeople now emerging from the water, but strangely enough, they were giving Harry amused smiles.

“Potter, what the fuck did you bring *her* for?!” Draco hissed angrily to him, nudging him painfully on the ribs and gesturing to Fleur’s little sister beside him, who was just starting to come around as well.

Harry winced as he shrugged nonchalantly and shook his hair out, spraying Draco with droplets of water before snapping his head back up and raking a hand backwards through the damp locks, causing some of the girls in the crowd to go doe-eyed.

“Fleur didn’t turn up at the last second... What did you think? I couldn’t leave her tied there!” Harry snapped back irritably, flushing in humiliation as Draco’s eyes widened comically.

“Harry, you stupid git!! Were you actually dense enough to think that the song was serious?! That was just for the time limit! They wouldn’t have left any of us down there, idiot!” Draco exclaimed, causing

Harry's irritation to flare up at the immense amusement dripping from his voice.

"Well...I—"

"Don't tell me you played the hero again... Haven't you had enough of that role?" Draco sneered, laughing when Harry merely raised a middle finger up at him in response, scowling.

"That's easy for *you* to say... You never saw anything that happened down there! You were too darn busy sleeping!" Harry retorted, snorting derisively at him as this time, a tinge of pink rose up in Draco's cheeks.

"Lucky too, that way I didn't have to see you make a complete fool of yourself." Draco said coolly, returning Harry's smirk with a smug grin.

"You have a serious gratitude problem, you know that Malfoy?!" Harry snapped impatiently, rolling his eyes and offering a hand to help Fleur's sister, who had been looking back and forth between the two Slytherins arguing, up.

Draco grinned and shrugged, shaking out the droplets of water in his hair and using one hand to slick it back in a suave and graceful manner, causing Harry to roll his eyes next to him in response.

"I always knew the wet look really goes well with me." He commented arrogantly, grinning as he and Harry joined the other champions with Madam Pomfrey, who was now fussing over all of them, wrapping them in large, warm blankets.

Harry avoided Hermione's eyes angrily, not having the stomach to see her sitting beside Krum and instead, focused his attention to the crowd of spectators across them. Hermione sighed and shook her head, looking away as Madam Pomfrey began fussing over the little girl now, wrapping the girl in a large comfy blanket and giving her a cup of hot chocolate.

"Herm-own-ninny, I am very sorry you had to go through with that..." Krum said, giving Hermione an apologetic smile and trying to hold her

hand in his but Hermione nervously twisted away from his grasp, shooting a fearful look at Harry's tense form.

Harry stared back at them blankly, scaring Hermione even more when she saw the flashing bolts of anger in his calm mask, knowing he had the potential to explode at any minute.

"Uh... Thank you Viktor, for saving me." She said politely, shooting Harry another look which Harry returned with by arching an eyebrow with irritation evident on his features, sneering at her before looking away.

Being with Harry a lot however, Hermione came to know that Harry's smirk was only a way for him to hide his emotions or his sensitive reactions to certain situations... Somewhat like a mask of protection which serves as his only defense or protection from his own insecurities...

She knew that the only reason Harry was acting that way because he was jealous of Viktor yet again, and he wasn't comfortable with the idea that she was the thing that Viktor would have missed the most if given the chance.

*It's not like that would be 'my' fault, Harry, you paranoid prat!* She silently screamed at him but Harry wasn't paying attention anymore, nodding as Bagman and Prof. Dumbledore began to converse with him briefly, both judges with smiles on their faces.

"*Gabrielle!* Gabrielle, are you alright?!" A frantic voice called out, causing Harry to whirl around and see Fleur running towards her sister, a look of relief and worry etched onto her ashen face.

"She's fine." Harry replied and soon enough, Fleur rounded on him and threw her arms around the Slytherins, giving him a tight embrace and repeatedly kissing him on the cheek.

"Oh, thank you 'arry! Thank you for saving 'er! Ze merpeople 'ave told me zat you saved her even though she was not your 'ostage... Thank you!" She gushed tearfully, clinging onto a stunned Harry and burying her face in his arms.

This time, Hermione stiffened beside Krum but didn't say anything, watching as Harry raised an eyebrow a suggestive eyebrow at Draco over Fleur's shoulder, awkwardly patting the girl on the back as she cried.

"It was ze grindlows! Zey attacked me! I thought... I thought I was too late, I thought..." Fleur shuddered and took a shaky breath of air, finally pulling away and giving Harry a teary smile.

"Actually, Fleur, to be completely honest with you, I—*oomph!*" He stopped, crying out in pain as Draco had nudged him sharply an idea flashing in the blonde's mind as he shot a sneer at Hermione, who was watching them intently.

"Of course, Harry would save your sister! He's just that type of guy, right Harry?" Draco asked, nudging Harry again, this time causing Harry to growl at him but nod reluctantly.

"I guess so—mmph!" Harry's eyes widened as Fleur had pressed her lips onto his all of a sudden, wrapping her slender arms around his neck to press their faces closer together as Draco backed away from them in disgust, shooting a look at Hermione.

Hermione's eyes had widened and for once, those warm brown eyes were filled with a deadly malicious glint of malevolence, her hands tightening into fists and her features twisting into an uncharacteristic snarl.

Harry just stood there, locking wide eyes with Hermione over Fleur's shoulder, neither pulling away or kissing back but just standing there stupidly like a statue unsure of what he should do or react.

Hermione's eyes were narrowing very slowly and her glare was burning a hole right through Harry, but Harry glared back, refusing to pull away from Fleur as she clung on tightly to him.

Finally, Madame Maxime had to pull Fleur off Harry, a look of disapproval and shame in her eyes as she literally stared down at her champion student.

“Now, now Fleur... Let us not smuzzer ‘arry, the boy ees obviously tired after such a task... Why don’t we go and check on your little seester?” She drawled, shooting a look at Fleur obviously not at all pleased.

Fleur winced at the harsh tone in her headmaster’s voice, shooting Harry a sheepish smile before she allowed Madame Maxime to drag her off towards Gabrielle, who was now shivering comfortably within a thick blanket.

Hermione had not taken her eyes off Harry since then, giving the Slytherin a poisonous look as Krum tried almost desperately to catch her attention, glancing cautiously at the look of anger on her face.

“Herm-own-ninny, you haff a water beetle in your hair...” Krum pointed out, reaching forward and taking a small beetle out of Hermione’s damp brown locks but Hermione barely heard him, still giving Harry her meanest glare which the Slytherin promptly tried to avoid, averting his eyes from hers.

Krum looked at Hermione in exasperation, obviously trying to draw Hermione’s attention back to him or to the fact that he had just rescued her from underwater but Hermione couldn’t have cared less, muttering dark curses involving the words “*Harry Potter*” under her breath.

Harry was now trying all possible ways to avoid meeting Hermione’s piercing brown eyes, listening to Draco scold him repeatedly about how stupid he had been to care about the other hostages and not take the advantage of finding the hostages first.

“Look, I didn’t know the damn song wasn’t really serious alright?!” Harry snapped, giving Draco a withering glare as he just snorted, running a hand to fix his now drying silver-blond hair.

“You idiot, didn’t you realize you could have won if you hadn’t been dense enough to be all *noble* to save all the bloody hostages?! Because of your damn hero instincts, Krum’s going to get the full marks!” Draco pointed out, giving him a frustrated look.

Harry's eyes narrowed sharply, his jaw clenching but he didn't have anything else to say to his defense, holding back his temper as Draco continued to rant on and on, complaining in front of him.

Instead of listening to Draco, he let his eyes wander over to where he could see Dumbledore crouching over what appeared to be the chief merperson, the female ranting on angrily as she shot wild looks at Harry, pointing to him from where she was underwater.

Dumbledore turned to give Harry an odd, unreadable look before he beckoned for the other judges over, obviously wanting to talk whatever it is the merperson had said over.

He watched as the other judges huddled together, conversing among themselves but before Harry could see anything else, Madam Pomfrey had grabbed his arm, leading him and Draco over to the other patients.

Hermione tensed, sensing him nearing but she turned away and conversed loudly with Krum, a scowl on her face and talking loudly to make sure Harry could hear their conversation.

Madam Pomfrey shoved Harry into a chair beside Fleur, finally allowing him to see the cuts on her face and her torn robes while Draco sat down beside him, looking disgusted at the potion he had just ingested.

"Herm-own-ninny, would you be villing to visit me during the summer? I really vant the chance to spend more time with you." Krum asked, giving Hermione a shy smile.

"Visit you during the summer?! Well... I..." Hermione let her voice trail off, now looking uncomfortable as Krum looked at her expectantly, Harry listening to them from nearby.

"You're kidding me, Krum! You're actually interested in that mudblood?!" Draco jeered out loud, sniggering to himself as Hermione flushed dark red, looking down at her lap in embarrassment.



Krum looked at Draco warningly, dislike obviously etched into his features as Draco just smirked back calmly, raising an eyebrow at him in challenge. "What?! Don't tell me you didn't know she was a mudblood? Or were you just ashamed to let other people know?" Draco snapped again, laughing.

Krum stood up so abruptly, his chair had slid back a few inches, his face now twisted into a hideous glare of anger. "Shut up, Malfoy, do not make me do something I vill regret later." He threatened, glaring down at him.

Draco's eyes hardened dangerously, looking back up in equal hatred as he made to push his chair back up and stand up as well but Harry placed a heavy hand on his shoulder, shoving him back down.

"Let it go, Draco... Dumbledore wouldn't like us beating up our well-treasured *guests*..." He said sarcastically, sneering at Krum calmly, ignoring the wide-eyed look Hermione was giving him.

Draco calmed down immediately, a light chuckle escaping his lips as he smirked in agreement, cracking his knuckles before turning away lazily, ignoring Krum altogether.

"Oh yeah? You don't have to be such a sore loser, Potter! Just because you haff been stupid in trying to take *my* hostage along with yours and den thinking the song was true, saving dis little girl..." Krum pointed out, looking highly amused at Harry's red face.

Draco snapped his attention back to Harry, his silver eyes widening in shock and disgust, shooting an accusing glare back and forth between him and Hermione.

"What?! Potter, you tried to save the mudblood?! What the hell were you thinking?! You should have left her there to rot!" He snapped scornfully, now looking at Harry with realization, looking disgusted as though Harry was the dirtiest creature had ever seen.

Harry's calm face suddenly twisted into an angry, wild glare, his green eyes darkening with malice as he felt all the anger he had been keeping inside him explode through his veins at Draco's words, seeing nothing but blood red around him.

“Harry, *no!!*” Hermione screamed out in fear, seeing the look on Harry’s face but Harry ignored her protest, standing up as though the chair had suddenly caught fire and lunging forward at an unsuspecting Krum in front of him.

Krum’s eyes had widened in fear as he saw the murderous intent in the Slytherin’s eyes, trying to back away from him but Harry was livid with rage, his handsome face twisted into a horrifying snarl.

“Harry, what the—” Draco stopped when Harry screamed out in anger and tackled Krum to the ground, both boys falling back dangerously onto the ground, rolling around in a wild tangle of limbs and violent punches.

“You stupid son of a bitch!” Harry cursed out loud, throwing another violent punch at Krum as the crowd began to murmur in excitement at seeing the two champions lunging at each other, the students pointing at them or cheering them on.

“Get off me, Potter!” Krum growled, both boys rolling around the ground, kicking and punching any thing they could have made contact with, ignoring the protests the other champions and the judges were shouting at them.

The crowd’s murmuring grew louder as Hermione stood over the two boys in hysterics, screaming for them to stop and watching helplessly as they continued to pummel each other endlessly, loud filthy words lingering in the air.

“Bastard!” Harry yelled out again, pulling his fist back and sending it crashing forcefully to the other boy’s face, both boys now having bloody lips and bruises all over their body.

Krum cursed out in pain and brought his knee up painfully to Harry’s groin, causing the Slytherin to stumble back and wheeze in pain, his eyes widening in shock and his face flushing in reaction.

“Damn you, Krum!” He spat out, pulling away from Krum and recoiling in pain, rolling around on the floor as Krum stood up weakly, wiping the blood dripping from his busted lip.

He took a shaky breath of air and looked down at Harry still cringing in pain at his feet, his features twisting into a hateful scowl as the Slytherin promptly met his glare with his own.

“Don’t you ever come near me again, Potter...” He said slowly, looking down at Harry before he looked up and gave Hermione a remorseful look, seeing her wild-eyed look but as he made to walk away from Harry towards her, Draco had stepped deliberately in his way, causing the crowd to scream some more in response.

“Foul play, *champion*...” He said sarcastically, giving him a contemptuous glare but before he had the chance to lunge at him as Harry had done, he felt a strong hand restrain him from behind, causing him to turn around and see Prof. Karkaroff giving him a threatening look.

“I think not, Mr. Malfoy...” He drawled in a low hiss, his dark eyes flashing in warning but Draco didn’t look impressed, merely raising an eyebrow calmly at the much older wizard.

Prof. Karkaroff never got the chance to explain as they heard a low growl behind them, causing them all to whirl around and see Harry pick himself off the ground and charge furiously at Krum, knocking them both to the ground and causing them to fall back into the lake.

“Mr. Potter!! Mr. Krum!” Dumbledore yelled out, his blue eyes radiating with anger as he made his way over to the lake’s edge calmly, watching the two boys throw violent fists and kicks towards one another.

“Harry!! Viktor!! Stop it, you’re making a scene in front of everyone!” Hermione screamed, her eyes clouded over in panic and a hint of wild desperation evident on her delicate features.

Draco momentarily stopped struggling with Prof. Karkaroff and shot a horrified look at Hermione, his silver eyes widening in disbelief and disgust. *Harry?!* He asked himself incredulously, wondering how on earth she could have called him by his first name in the first place.

A beetle crawled up to Hermione’s leg again but she flicked it away impatiently, kneeling down by the lake’s edge and watching with an

openly gaping jaw as Harry threw another punch at Krum again, this time catching the older boy right in the eye.

“Alright, that’s enough!” Dumbledore said calmly, taking his wand out and flicking his wand over the two boys in the water, immediately causing them to disappear from view and reappear back on the shore, both boys tied heavily to a separate chair.

Hermione felt a wave of relief, shaking her head as Harry struggled wildly with the straps binding him to his chair, growling out loud as he refused to remove his crazily angry eyes off Krum’s bruised form.

“Let me go!! Let me go, dammit!” He snapped out loud, struggling with his binds again and before Dumbledore had gotten the chance to flick his wand, he had watched in shock as the ropes holding Harry had begun to burn away, almost instinctively at his command.

The others hadn’t seemed to notice, thinking it was Dumbledore who had released the ropes on Harry, more intent on the fact that Harry had been released, the Slytherin hurling the ropes back down onto the ground.

Taking one last look at Krum, Harry clenched his fists again and glared right back at Hermione, sneering at the worried expression on her face before he shoved past Draco and Karkaroff and stormed off, running back towards the castle silently.

Dumbledore watched him, still in shock over his bit of wandless magic but he blinked and shook his head, forcing himself to smile again and turn back to meet the bewildered, murmuring crowd across them.

Hermione bit her lip and watched Harry go, sensing his fury even in his large angry strides, wanting nothing more than to run after him but she knew that wouldn’t be the best thing to do right now, especially in front of the whole population of Hogwarts.

“Oh dear... There goes our other Hogwarts champion... I guess we’ll have to read the scores without him.” Dumbledore quipped cheerfully, causing some of the other judges to give him a strange, annoyed look.

Draco watched, a cold, heated look on his face as his best friend ran back towards the castle, ignoring the loud protests from the crowd, running back inside and slamming the entrance doors noisily afterwards.

Dumbledore just smiled cheekily at them, shrugging to himself and beckoning for the other champions and judges to join him, taking the long parchment the merperson had handed him. Then, still smiling, he handed the list over to Bagman, who read it briefly, looking ecstatic and facing the crowd excitedly, a large, beaming smile on his face.

Draco glared down at Hermione disgustedly as he passed her going to his seat, scoffing loudly to himself before he sat down, waiting for the results as he briefly narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Hermione's deep state of thought.

*Why do I somehow get the feeling Harry's not telling me something?* He thought to himself angrily, clenching his jaw tensely.

He didn't know exactly why he had developed this suspicion but he had seen it... He had seen the same sparkle in Harry's eyes that he knew he himself had for AJ and it was actually directed at Hermione.. Just the very thought was enough for him to shake his head in shame.

*Oh no... The stupid git... I've told him before... Now he's done it... He's fallen in love with her...* He thought in realization, recognizing the look in Hermione's brown eyes as she sat back down next to a bleeding, bruised Krum, whom Karkaroff was now fussing over.

*I can't believe it... How did she do it? How did she actually manage to make a guy like Harry fall in love with her? Did she actually stoop so low as to use a love potion or something?!* He thought, giving Hermione a mocking look.

Draco broke out of his thoughts when Bagman spoke up again, his loud voice echoing throughout the surroundings back to the noisy, excited murmuring of the crowd, drawing them into silence once again.

“Well, anyway, perhaps Mr. Potter has a sudden urgent need to go to the bathroom!” Bagman boomed out, causing the crowd to chuckle to themselves in agreement and amusement.

“Nevertheless, we shall announce the results of the second task... Of course, for Ms. Delacour, who had used an excellent Bubble-head charm to her advantage and though she was not able to return her hostage due to a Grindylow attack, we award *twenty five points*.” He announced, causing the audience to automatically burst into applause looking at Fleur, who was shaking her head at herself.

“I deserve zero...” She muttered, sighing heavily as she promptly tried to avoid Madame Maxime’s accusing glare at her.

“Cedric Diggory, who has also used Bubble-Head charm, and has returned safely with his hostage, however, a minute outside the time limit, we award him *forty seven points*.” Bagman announced jovially, causing the Hufflepuffs on the stand to erupt into loud cheers and screams in support.

Cho turned and gave Cedric a big, glowing smile, her eyes shining in adoration for her boyfriend as he just smiled back in response, nodding to the crowd in acknowledgement. Draco rolled his eyes, muttering something unflattering under his breath which Cedric politely pretended not to hear, listening as Bagman moved on with the list.

“And to Viktor Krum, who had used a rather incomplete form of transfiguration, but nevertheless, effective, we award him *forty points*.” He continued, nearly drowned out by Karkaroff’s loud, superior clapping, shooting smug looks at everyone around him.

Hermione managed a wan smile at Krum, wishing she could have dived back down to the very bottom of the lake as she avoided all the teasing stares the other Gryffindors were shooting her from the stands. Krum just looked at her intently, watching as Hermione seemed to stare off into space again in the direction Harry had gone, her features filled suspiciously with misery and longing.

Unfortunately, Draco seemed to notice the same thing as he walked right up to Hermione, a malicious sneer on his face as he spoke to her in a low, snarling hiss.

“Hey Granger... Hope you like the surprise Harry’s going to give you... because you’re definitely in for the *biggest* surprise of your life... Enjoy it.. Or better yet, *him*, while the attraction lasts... I almost feel sorry for you...” He spat out, his sneer widening when he saw the confusion on her face.

“What are you talking about now, *ferret?!* ” She snapped angrily, her face darkening as she met his glare in challenge, not wanting to be intimidated by the feared Slytherin at all.

Draco’s sneer faltered for a brief moment at the comment but he recovered easily, snarling and raising an eyebrow at her in response.

“Guess you weren’t as smart and hard-to-get as we thought, huh Granger? You’ll regret ever getting involved soon... Then maybe next time you’ll learn that Gryffindor losers only go with other Gryffindor losers...” He drawled lazily.

Hermione’s eyes clouded over in worry and fear, her eyebrows coming to meet together in confusion as she tried to ponder on his words. “Just what are you trying to say, Malfoy?” She asked carefully, almost dreading the answer.

Draco just gave her a knowing smirk, a superior glint of smug disdain obvious in his silver eyes as he answered. “Oh come on, Granger... Did you actually think any of it was actually real? How dense are you really?” He scoffed, sniggering to himself as she turned red in anger.

Before she got the chance to answer his question, however, Bagman had interrupted them again, now looking at the crowd with a big smile on his face.

“Finally, Harry Potter, who used gillyweed to great effect, who has returned last with his hostage and outside of the time limit, *however*, the Merchieftainess has informed us that Mr. Potter was the first to reach the hostages, but was delayed with the decision to bring back *both* hostages important to him and later on, was delayed with

bringing up the only remaining hostage left other than his own.” Bagman explained, a proud look on his face.

“However, circumstances that have occurred underneath the water have also informed us that Mr. Potter was the only champion who had dared to fight against the merpeople single-handedly without fear of his own safety or concern about meeting the time limit...” He continued, causing both Draco and Hermione’s eyes to widen in surprise and amusement.

“We the judges... Well... *Most* of the judges,” Bagman amended, shooting a sharp glare at Karkaroff. “Believe that this is showing a beautiful example of selfless courage with a surge of powerful conviction and true allegiance not only to his friends but to himself... We award him *forty five points*.” He finished, causing the stands to erupt in cheers for the Slytherin champion.

Cedric looked obviously disappointed as Draco sneered at him, looking at him with a smug look in his eyes. “Well then, *Diggory*, looks like you and Harry are tied for first place.” He taunted, grinning when Cedric shot him a poisonous glance in return before walking away, looking highly annoyed at the comment.

Fleur was clapping very hard too but Krum didn’t look too pleased as he began trying to engage Hermione in a conversation again though the brunette was too busy staring at Draco in confusion and anger, his words still echoing through her head again and again.

“The champions will be informed of the next task one month before the set date- the twenty fourth of June. That will be all then, congratulations to all our champions for a task well done.” Bagman finished, glancing around for a sign of Harry.

“Good luck Granger... You’ll need it...” Draco drawled again as he pushed past her, not even bothering to glance back at her as he slowly began walking back to the other Slytherins, a haughty smile on his face.

*What the hell isn’t he telling me?!* Hermione asked herself silently in fury, following Krum back towards the Hogwarts castle as Bagman



and the other judges led the other students in the stands back in behind her.

“Herm-own-ninny, vat is it there between you and Potter?” Krum asked as he hurried after Hermione back to the castle, his surly face formed into an angry scowl at her.

Hermione sighed and didn’t turn around, continuing to weave her way through the crowd of people who were making their way back up towards the castle, trying her best to avoid answering Krum’s question.

“Hey watch it!” An annoyed, female voice had snapped, causing Hermione to look right into the irritated eyes of Parvati, who was making her way towards the castle with her twin sister and their friends.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?! *Slut!*” She snapped, flipping her hair over her shoulder and shooting Hermione her meanest glare, throwing a smirk at Viktor over her shoulder.

Hermione noticed that Lavender was, as usual, not with them once again, the other girl seeming to distance herself away from Parvati for sometime now, almost as though the two best friends had gotten into a fight.

*Come to think it... I haven’t seen Lavender hanging out with Parvati at all these past few weeks...* Hermione realized, giving Parvati a neutral look to hide her anger.

“I suggest looking at yourself first, Parvati, before deciding to call anyone a slut. Or perhaps... a *bitch*...” Hermione said coldly, meeting her gaze confidently as Parvati’s eyes narrowed at the implied insult but she didn’t say anything, only gesturing to her friends behind her.

“Let’s go... Tell Viktor congratulations for me, will you?” She said spitefully, red with humiliation, shooting her one more venomous look before she sauntered past Hermione, making sure to deliberately push her out of the way as she did.

Hermione stumbled back a step but stood her ground, refusing to be intimidated by her while Padma just shot her a smug smile from over her shoulder, rolling her eyes and looking away as though she was some kind of filthy animal.

As soon as the group of girls had gone, Hermione let out a breath of relief, running a hand through her hair just as Krum had reached her, stopping and panting for breath.

“Herm-own-ninny, vat did your friends vant?” He asked curiously, looking at Parvati’s retreating back as Hermione visibly cringed at the word ‘friend’, trying hard not to burst out laughing or look horrified.

“Nothing, Viktor... Listen... Thank you so much for saving me today... I’m really flattered I mean that much to you but—”

“Oy! Hermione! Are you coming?!” Ron shouted from where he was with Seamus and Lavender, peering at her from among the group of people still crowding towards the entrance to Hogwarts.

“No, go on ahead... I’ll be fine...” Hermione called back, seeing the disapproving look Ron and Seamus were shooting towards Krum, not wanting to start another riot between them.

It seemed all the students passing by were talking about the Harry/Krum fight, each trying to decide what the champions had been fighting about or trying to see if they could scratch one rumor off the other.

She wasn’t about to raise any more suspicions by having her two best friends start another feud with Krum once again, knowing that the school would take it she was somehow linked to all this.

Ron still looked slightly reluctant but nodded, making their way towards the castle as Hermione turned and met Krum’s eyes again, feeling guilty when she saw the reproachful look in them.

“Also, thank you for inviting me over the summer... I’m not so sure if I can go but I really appreciate the offer...” She said awkwardly, biting her lip as Krum only nodded in response, leaving them in a tense, uncomfortable silence once again.

“But Herm-own-ninny, you haff not answered my question... Vat is there between you and—”

“We better head back towards the castle, then... I have to finish up on my homework.” Hermione interrupted, giving him a tight smile as she deliberately avoided his question and headed back inside, not checking to see Krum’s reaction.

He stared after her with a sour, angry growl on his face, his tall frame tense and rigid before he followed at a slower pace, muttering something to himself as he walked. Hermione let out a huge breath of relief and entered the castle, making her way back towards the Gryffindor towers hurriedly to avoid anymore people bombarding her with questions.

*I don't know how I can handle this anymore... This is getting really old fast...* She thought in exasperation, sighing to herself as she rounded a corner.

Just as she was going to turn into another corridor, a hand shout out from nowhere and grasped tightly around her arm, yanking her backwards violently into a nearby broom closet.

Hermione opened her mouth to scream but before she could, a hand had covered her mouth again, muffling the sound instantly as she kicked and struggled with her captor, scratching and punching whatever flesh she could reach.

Her heart began pounding rapidly in her chest in fear, trying desperately to escape whatever kind of grasp she was trapped in, wildly twisting around to see who was holding her from behind.

She was dragged, kicking and struggling all the way into the small, dark broom closet where the captor immediately released the hold he had on her and spun her around to face him, allowing her to see the flashing emerald green eyes even in the darkness.

Hermione felt both a wave of relief and a wave of irritation as Harry reached a hand up and flicked on the nearest light switch, causing a faint glow of light to spread in the small, cramped closet.

Even in the faint glow of light, Hermione could see the stormy anger in Harry's green eyes and his handsome face twisted into a hideous snarl of rage, several cuts and bruises on his cheek from the fight earlier.

"Damn you, Granger." He said fiercely in a low growl, his eyes glinting before he stepped forward and claimed her lips with his hungrily, his hands immediately snaking behind her waist and yanking her towards him.

Hermione gasped at the aggressive kiss, not at all being used to having Harry kiss her like that anymore as he used her momentary state of shock to spin her around and pin her against the closet wall, deepening the kiss.

Hermione's eyes fluttered shut and she finally allowed him to take full control, reaching up behind his neck to weave her delicate fingers through those silky raven strands, delighting in their soft, damp texture.

Harry broke away for a brief moment to take in some air to breath but he soon pressed his lips against hers again, pressing her hard against the wall, his hands tight on her slender waist.

Hermione winced inwardly in pain as her back collided with the hard wall but she ignored the pain, kissing Harry back in equal amounts of longing and desire, pressing her body close against his, marveling at the warm heat radiating from his form.

Completely bursting with the heat of the moment, Hermione took that advantage to wrap her long legs around Harry's waist, wrapping her arms around the boy's neck for support as Harry's eyes widened at the daring action, breaking the kiss and looking at Hermione in disbelief.

"Hermione—"

Hermione broke him off by leaning forward and kissing him again persistently, not giving the boy a chance to speak as she pulled his face down towards hers, drawing Harry back into the passionate moment.

Harry deepened the kiss once more by pressing the girl onto the wall again, eliciting a sigh from Hermione as she winced in pain again, the cold wall now pressing very painfully onto her back.

After what seemed like a long moment, Harry finally broke the kiss, breathing very heavily, his face completely flushed and his hair now disheveled, a tingling, pleasant feeling still lingering on his lips.

Hermione took in a deep breath and slowly entangled her legs from around his waist, setting them back down onto the floor unsteadily, refusing to release the arms she had around his neck to help her remain standing.

Harry pressed his forehead onto hers, panting for breath as he closed his eyes briefly, waiting until his breathing had returned to normal before he said anything else. "I... I didn't know you were that *fiery*..." He whispered in a weak teasing voice, causing Hermione to blush but chuckle, leaning forward and placing a kiss on his scar.

"You don't like it?" She asked, giving him a pointed look as Harry shook his head hastily, giving her a rueful smirk.

"Now I didn't say *that*..." He murmured, leaning forward and placing a kiss on the pulse point in her neck, causing Hermione to shiver in response.

Harry let out another one of his sexy chuckles, immediately sending another shiver down Hermione's spine, causing her knees to buckle from underneath her.

Then, Harry's face suddenly turned grim, turning away from her gaze as he briefly remembered Hermione being carried by Krum just a while ago, her beautiful form being touched by another besides him.

Hermione seemed to sense this as she gently turned his face towards hers again, forcing the Slytherin to meet her warm eyes. "Harry... About what happened back there... I hope you know—"

"You were his fucking hostage! How could you have agreed to such a thing?!" He blurted out, his face twisted into a raging growl of anger and jealousy.

Hermione glared back easily at him, not at all wanting to show any signs of submissiveness to the Slytherin. "Harry, it's not as if it was my fault... I hadn't wanted to be his hostage in the first place." She answered calmly, meeting his gaze.

Harry clenched his hands into fists, his face darkening into a scowl at her calm, patient tone of voice. "That bastard wants you! He wants to grovel at your very feet and serve at your beck and call! It's so damn obvious!" He spat out angrily, his eyes flashing.

Hermione didn't react, only reaching forward and grasping his hand in hers, leaning to give him a soothing kiss on the cheek. "So let him... I already told you... I'm not interested in Krum, Harry... I love *you*..." She assured him again, this time causing Harry's shoulders to relax at her words.

"But... He... I tried to save you down there as well but he took you from me and he—" Hermione silenced Harry by placing her lips on his again, giving him a warm, gentle kiss before pulling back and looking at him, her eyes twinkling.

"Yes you did... So the judges have announced... And you earned points because of it." She told him teasingly, causing Harry's eyes to widen in shock at her.

"What?!" He choked out, his jaw dropping open in disbelief.

Hermione laughed and shook her head, reaching forward and brushing back the lock of raven hair that had fallen into the handsome Slytherin's eyes.

"The judges have talked your situation over with the merpeople and judging from the way you were the only champion brave enough to fight them for your conviction and the fact you saved Fleur's sister even if you didn't have to earned you extra points for it." She explained, laughing.

Harry sputtered in disbelief, his eyes glazing over in thought and in incredulity. "So who—?"

"You and Cedric are tied for first place now... I tell you, Viktor didn't look too happy when he found out... Especially since you had just beaten him up." She pointed out, causing a sneer to break out on Harry's face.

"Well good... He had better keep away from you if he doesn't want me to castrate him... The smarmy bastard..." He muttered darkly under his breath to himself but Hermione caught every word, giving him a sharp glare.

"Harry, I don't understand you... You have nothing to be jealous about and yet you still doubt me any chance you get... What are you afraid of?" Hermione asked gently, turning his face towards hers again.

Harry didn't respond but he looked away, biting his lip uncomfortably as he thought of the answer to her question. Why *did* he feel so possessive of Hermione? It just sounded so bizarre for him to be the one making sure the girl wasn't cheating on him... Usually it was the other way around...

He just didn't feel comfortable with the fact that Hermione was still currently left out in the open despite everything that's happened... She was still, in the eyes of others, available for the taking and that completely pissed him off to think others actually think they have a chance with the beautiful Gryffindor.

The jealousy he was experiencing now all the time was enough to drive him completely insane... It seemed that any guy who got too close to Hermione now got to Harry's nerves and made his blood boil... The worst part was... He could do nothing about it but watch... Knowing his housemates would react if he was to show his jealousy in public.

So instead of showing his jealousy, he deliberately scared the guys away by his usual witty and insulting barbs, causing the guy to go an interesting shade of red and stalk away in fear of the popular Slytherin.

The only one so far who seemed completely neutral and calm about this was Krum himself and that was one of the reasons Harry hated

the guy so much. The guy didn't know to stay on his own property... And Slytherins were very much possessive of what was theirs...

*Nobody can have Hermione except me... She's mine...* He thought stubbornly, a selfish gleam in his eye as he looked back at Hermione's curious brown orbs, losing himself in their warm sparkle.

He knew he was probably being unfair... That he didn't have any right to claim Hermione as his at all since he was still hiding the bet from her but he just couldn't bear the thought of Hermione being with anyone else besides him... Even if being with Hermione *had* started out as a measly dare for him in the first place.

Just the simple fact that Hermione meant more than a friend to Krum made Harry's blood start boiling up to the temper point, knowing that Krum had the advantage over him of being able to say that his intentions for Hermione were sincere from the start.

*Mine weren't...* Harry thought angrily, feeling his anger flare up again but he squelched it back down, not wanting to show any slightest trace of anything else to Hermione.

Hermione sighed, seeing Harry's distant expression and placed both hands on the sides of his face, turning him towards her to inspect his bruises in concern. "We should get you to Madam Pomfrey, Harry... You're bruised pretty bad..." She said softly, letting a finger linger on a small bruise as Harry winced in pain.

"I'm fine, this is nothing... I can handle this." He said stiffly in a gruff voice, his mouth set into a stubborn scowl of anger as he stared back at her.

Hermione raised an annoyed eyebrow and used a hand to press a bruise on his cheek again, this time causing the Slytherin to cry out in pain loudly.

"Fine huh? Nothing?" She asked sarcastically, raising an eyebrow at him pointedly as Harry pouted childishly in annoyance but said nothing, pulling back from Hermione and turning his back to her in embarrassment and annoyance.



“Gryffindors...” He mumbled to himself, not seeing Hermione stamp her foot and roll her eyes at his antics, leaning forward and wrapping her slender arms around his firm, lean waist, resting her chin on his shoulder.

“Harry... Come on, I’m sorry okay? I’m sorry if you had to see me with Viktor earlier... I’m sorry if I had to agree to be his hostage... I’m sorry... But you don’t have anything to worry about because I don’t love Viktor... I love *you*, you stupid git.” She said gently but her voice filled with sincerity and affection, causing Harry’s scowl to soften into a soft, slightly reluctant smile.

He still refused to say anything else, much to Hermione’s annoyance as she leaned forward and pinched the Slytherin in the ribs, causing him to growl in irritation. “Please? Harry? Say something!” She persisted, pinching him again playfully, earning an irritated growl from the raven-haired Slytherin.

“Please?? Harry... Haaarrrry...” She whined again, an uncharacteristic, playful smile on her face as she imitated the voice of a mere child, causing Harry to glare at her in aggravation.

“I love you... I love you...” She repeated, kissing his cheek with repeatedly with the phrase, this time finally causing a smile to break out on Harry’s handsome face.

“Alright, alright... I... I forgive you Granger... I swear, you surprise me sometimes... You’re such a Gryffindork...” He said fondly, giving her an affectionate smirk as Hermione grinned in response, leaning forward and kissing his scar again.

“Viktor is *not* competition Harry... No one is... Believe me, I only have my eyes on you.” She said tenderly, this time causing Harry’s eyes to sparkle as he leaned forward and caught her lips in his again, knowing Hermione was telling him the truth.

When they had pulled back, Hermione closed her eyes and snuggled into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck. “You were brilliant you know... Incredible... I’m proud of you... You were the best champion out there.” She said, her eyes still closed as she spoke.

Harry responded by squeezing her lightly, giving her a kiss on the top of her head, staring off into the dark corner of the small broom closet in deep thought.

"I heard you were even the first to reach the hostages but you took so long because you wanted to bring more than one hostage up with you... And the way you brought back Fleur's little sister as well... It was really wonderful... I just couldn't tell you in front of everyone else... And I thought you were mad at me..." Hermione admitted sheepishly.

"Why is that?" Harry asked curiously, looking down at the girl in his arms with an amused smile on his face.

"Because... You were giving me your infamous death glare again for being with Viktor... I thought you hated me for it... I didn't realize you were only jealous." She said, laughing when Harry tensed beside her.

"I was *not* jealous... I was—"

"*Steaming* with jealousy... Come on, Harry... I know you already... Don't lie to me." Hermione said easily, actually giving him a smirk which could have rivaled his own easily.

Harry flushed in embarrassment as Hermione laughed again, shaking her head at him in amusement. "Well, fine... I was jealous but I had my reasons... The jerk was practically drooling all over you... I wanted to punch his bloody brains out..." He mumbled, glaring down at his shoes.

Hermione gave him a reprimanding glare but couldn't help hide a smile to herself at the adorable way the Slytherin was uncharacteristically shuffling his feet around on the floor in embarrassment.

"You're so adorable when you're embarrassed, Harry." She teased, laughing out loud at the horrified look on Harry's face.

"I am *not* adorable! You have got to be the first and *only* girl who has called me *adorable*." He snapped irritably, his face darkening even more when Hermione only grinned in response.

Harry scowled again and cupped her cheek with his hand, looking at her features intently. "Stay away from anyone else unless you want me to hunt them down... That's my only warning, Granger." He said softly, caressing her face.

Hermione shuddered at the dangerous death tone in his soft voice, trying hard not to let her intimidation show as she merely nodded and responded by allowing him to envelop her in an embrace.

The two refused to say anything else for a couple of moments, both lost in their own thoughts as Harry calmly stroked Hermione's hair, his eyes distant with thoughts about what was to come ahead.

The bet was still lingering on his mind... He was afraid of what was going to happen if he decided to call it off... He still couldn't decide whether or not he was ready to risk all out for Hermione...

To be completely honest, he had absolutely no idea where their relationship was going to lead to... Hell, he didn't even know or he wasn't guaranteed the fact that this was going to last... It would be like taking a road in which he had no idea where it would lead to... And what surprised him the most was...

*I couldn't care less...* He thought, looking down at the pair of warm, brown eyes staring up at him, glowing with pure, sincere love and complete trust.

Looking at Hermione somehow made a sharp pang shoot right through his heart in guilt, knowing he probably should shrivel up on the ground for the trust she was actually bestowing upon him.

He couldn't understand her... How could she ever trust *him*, a Slytherin, *and* her former enemy so openly like that? How could she, after *everything* he had done in the past to hurt her, still have the decency to give him her trust once again?

It was almost as if Hermione was being deliberately blind when it came to him... Deliberately blind to his harsh, cruel actions and his unchanging ways... Like she didn't want to see the bad traits in him... A kind of blind, foolish love that Harry never quite understood.

*And yet I love her for it...* He realized, squeezing her gently in response, causing Hermione to snuggle deeper into his arms, closing her eyes in contentment.

She was ignoring all his past behavior towards her, his past reputation, his continuing, horrible personality and yet, after all this, she still finds it in her heart to trust her...

*A true Gryffindor...* Harry thought, half in amusement, half in secret admiration, feeling a strange sense of pride overwhelm him at the thought. *While I'm a true Slytherin...A complete fraud...* He added nastily, sneering at his own self in disdain as Hermione pulled back and looked at him in question, her eyes full of concern.

"Harry? Since we're talking about... Us... I... Well... I saw Fleur earlier when she—" She stopped abruptly, when Harry broke out into a round of sniggers, his trademark smirk suddenly reappearing on his face.

"You don't have to say anything, Hermione... I saw you were jealous... It happens you know... I happen to be the most handsome bloke there is." He said arrogantly, winking at her, causing Hermione to roll her eyes, giving him an annoyed, ticked-off look.

"Extremely modest too..." She mumbled, making a face secretly to herself, the irritation evident in her eyes.

Harry smirked and shrugged, raising an eyebrow as Hermione looked up again and met his gaze, a reluctant, timid expression on her face. Seeing this, Harry's smirk instantly transformed into a frown, looking at her in concern.

"What? Is something wrong?" He asked, fusing his eyebrows together as he looked at her.

Hermione sighed and began nervously playing with a lock of her brown hair, avoiding Harry's demanding eyes as she spoke. "Well... I didn't want to bother you about it but... See... When you left earlier... Malfoy, he.. He told me something..." She started, looking up to see his reaction.

Harry's eyes had hardened in anger and panic, fearful of what was about to come next out of the Gryffindor's mouth. "And...?" He asked sharply, causing her to wince at the harshness of his voice.

"Well... I didn't understand him... He said something about enjoying our relationship while it lasts... What did he mean by that, Harry? Something about you having a surprise for me...?" She asked, looking at him directly in the eye as she waited for an answer.

Harry deliberately snapped his gaze away, not having the courage to look her in the eye as he forced himself to answer her question. "I... I....I don't know what he's talking about..." He lied in a low whisper, his eyes dropping guiltily to the floor.

Hermione watched him carefully as Harry avoided her eyes, looking at everything else around the broom closet except her, shifting around in uneasiness. "Are you sure Harry? Is there something... *anything* you want to tell me?" She asked softly, trying to encourage him by reaching out and clasping his hand with hers tightly.

Harry finally force himself to look up and meet Hermione's beautiful, brown orbs... Looking right at him with so much love and understanding that he almost couldn't bear the thought of taking that away...

*Tell her! Tell her, Potter, dammit!* A voice screamed inside his head, making him cringe and bite his lip for a moment, thinking deeply to himself.

Draco's words and the faces of the other Slytherins swirled around in his mind, all of their voices seeming to mock him about falling in love with the girl he was supposed to hate... For falling in love with one of his enemies.... Falling for the girl he was supposed to humiliate and instead, he ended up humiliating himself....

*Weak...* A harsh whisper that seemed to pierce right through his pride and ego, having enough to force to make him pull away from Hermione as if she was on fire and face the wall hastily, trying to cover up by burying his face in his hands.

“Harry?” Hermione asked, surprised at his sudden rushed action, watching him as he briefly leaned against the opposite wall to compose himself.

“Nothing.” He whispered, his voice hoarse and raspy, his back still facing her while a defeated expression was evident on his downcast features.

“What?” She asked, looking more confused than ever as she tried to see his face but Harry turned away again, stiffening in anger but not at Hermione but at himself.

“*Nothing.* Nothing, *Hermione*, I... I don’t need to tell you anything... It’s not important... Ignore what Draco said... It’s... It’s *nothing.*” He hissed, clenching his hands tightly as Hermione looked reluctant but nodded, giving him a smile.

“If you say so, Harry... I would never believe anything they say about you... I know the best way to know the truth was to ask you myself... I trust you.” She told him, giving him a kiss on the lips but Harry visibly flinched at her words and yanked himself away roughly again, nearly crashing into the wall.

*‘I trust you...’* The words echoed again and again in his head and he shook them away fiercely, blinking and cursing to himself to clear the thoughts away.

“Harry! What’s gotten into you? Are you—”

“I’m not feeling very well right now... Maybe we should get back to our houses... I’m a bit tired from the task.” Harry interrupted curtly, looking away from her again, masking his eyes with nonchalance and a strange, uncomfortable twinge of coldness in them.

Hermione bit her lip at his change of mood but nodded, sighing as Harry briefly opened the door, making sure no one was in the corridor before gesturing for her to walk out, running a hand to fix his hair casually.

“So, I’ll see you—” Hermione stopped when she saw that Harry had already turned away and began walking back to the Slytherin dungeons, not even muttering a single word of goodbye as he left.

She felt her heart drop painfully to the ground at the cold act but she refused to let it show, sighing again and walking down the opposite corridor towards Gryffindor towers, wondering to herself what she could have done wrong to change Harry’s mood like that.

Somehow, it was always difficult to understand the Slytherin... It was hard to understand why Harry sometimes acted the way he did... Something about him was just so complicated, dark and complex and it frustrated her to think she could never fully understand his actions at times.

*If only he would stop wearing his damn mask all the bloody time... He’s so difficult than most of the other boys I’ve known... He’s a different mind on his own, altogether.* She thought angrily, shaking her head.

Just as she was about to round a corner, a pair of hands grabbed her from behind again and spun her around into a full, passionate kiss, a pair of warm, sweet lips pressing and caressing hers fervently.

Hermione opened her eyes as she was released, seeing Harry’s tall frame once more, the Slytherin looking at her with an apologetic, shameful look in his eyes so rarely seen that Hermione blinked in surprise at him.

Harry pulled her into a hug, burying his face in her sweet-smelling hair as he spoke. “Oh, Hermione... I’m sorry... I don’t mean to act so cold towards you all the time... It’s just that... Some parts of me will never and will never *want* to change... I’m trying my best here... Just give me some more time...” He murmured softly into her hair.

Hermione felt her eyes tear up at the tender, meaningful action, knowing that Harry meant each and every one of his words despite the fact the Slytherin wasn’t even used to that kind of sincerity.

“So... I'll see you tomorrow night then? In front of the prefect's bathroom?” He asked gently, pulling back and tilting her face towards his again.

Hermione looked up into his smoldering green eyes and nodded, entranced by the emeralds staring back at her as Harry smiled briefly, a sparkle of affection momentarily shining in his cold eyes as he leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her again, leaving no room for words as the kiss spoke for them.

*I 'will' tell her... I'll... 'Tomorrow Night...' I'll tell her then...* He resolved to himself, though there was still a hint or reluctance and dreadful fear inside him but he pushed it aside for the moment, not wanting to think about it.

“Tomorrow... *Midnight...*” He whispered, caressing her face once more before he turned and sauntered down the corridor, not glancing back to see the beautiful glow on Hermione's face as she watched him go, robes swishing and all.

“I can't hardly wait...” She whispered, smiling as she touched her cheek where he had caressed her, watching as her Slytherin turned the corner and shot one last look at her before he disappeared into the dark dungeons, leaving her alone in the dark corridor.

Then, surprised, she blinked, shaking her head. *'My' Slytherin? Where did that come from?* She thought, blushing profusely as she turned and walked back to Gryffindor towers slowly, chuckling inwardly at herself.

As she walked down the dark, gloomy hallways back to her common room, only one thought plagued her mind, causing a faint blush to spread onto her cheeks.

*I'm sure of it now... I love him... I'm willing now... I'm willing to give myself to him... Body 'and' soul...* She thought, feeling a rush of fear and of nervousness overcome her at the intimate thought.

*Tomorrow night...*



**A/N:** To point out, I DON'T own the song Harry sang to AJ in the earlier part of the chapter, the song is entitled "**Fake Wings**" composed by **Yuki Kajiura**, and *no*, it wasn't my idea, it was a song suggested to me by **K.B. 1004** so thankies!! You guys should download the song, it's a nice song to match as Harry and AJ's special lullaby!

## Chapter 26- Believe in Me

“Harry!”

Harry winced and didn't dare to turn around at the voice of his well-known mentor, his fingers tightening around the books in his hands as he willed his feet to walk faster.

“Harry, I know you can hear me... You know as well as I do that I do not tolerate disrespect among my students... Now prove to me you are a true Slytherin and face me.”

Harry sighed in defeat and stopped in the middle of the hallway, reluctantly turning around to face the grim expression on Prof. Snape's face from where the older Slytherin stood facing him on the other end of the hall.

“Professor... I can't right now... I have to get to class...” Harry mumbled, shooting the passing students in the corridor an annoyed, threatening glare that indicated to them perfectly that they would be in trouble if they dared to stop and watch them.

Prof. Snape didn't flinch, calmly walking towards Harry in a lazy stride, his jet-black eyes focused entirely on the raven-haired student in front of him.

“I know that, Harry but I took the liberty of informing Prof. Sprout of your upcoming absence for her class this morning because I have a couple important matters to discuss with you.” He drawled slowly, coming to stop right in front of Harry, who was looking at his head of house in slight trepidation.

“What the fuck are you all staring at?!” He growled at a group of passing Gryffindor first years, causing the lot to squeak and rush away, not wanting to anger the popular Slytherin.

Prof. Snape smirked at this but said nothing, marveling at the fact that some things just never seemed to change at all, despite everything else that has happened. “What about Professor? I didn't do anything

today, I swear... It was Draco who had been recently pulling all those pranks on the other students.” Harry admitted wearily, earning him an amused smirk from his professor.

“Relax Harry, you’re not in trouble for anything, if that’s what you’re thinking. I just want to talk to you about some things... Surely you wouldn’t mind skipping one measly Herbology lesson? I myself have never really liked that worthless subject... A complete waste of time, I might add...” Snape commented wryly, rolling his eyes.

Harry, in spite of himself, cracked a weak but amused smirk at his professor’s tone of voice, silently nodding in obvious agreement.

Prof. Snape nodded in acknowledgement before he placed a firm hand on Harry’s shoulder and began leading the younger Slytherin into his office, ignoring the fearful looks the other students were throwing at them as they passed.

“I am... Well, a bit worried about you lately, Harry... You seem pretty much preoccupied all at the time and your grades in my class have been a bit... *lower* than usual... I want to make sure you are coping with everything well.” Prof. Snape started as they entered the office, closing the door gently behind him.

Harry didn’t say anything as he immediately plopped down on one of the seats and sighed, burying his head into his hands and closing his eyes sleepily in response. Snape sighed as well but not out of tiredness but out of exasperation, shaking his head before he walked over and plopped down on the seat across from Harry, keeping his expression grim as he did.

“Harry... I know you have recently been handling so many hard, heavy issues right now... What with having just finished the second task, dealing with all the heavy workload, the publicity from nosy reporters and of course, the recent attack on your twin sis—”

“I’m *fine*, Professor.” Was the harsh, curt reply, cutting Prof. Snape off entirely from finishing his sentence but he didn’t wince at all, instead, felt a surge of irritation at his favorite student’s abruptness and stubbornness.

"No you are *not*, Harry. You may be able to fool others with that annoying behavior but it will certainly not work with me. I have talked to your best friend Draco and even *he* admitted that something was wrong with you, although he respected you in not telling me what it was..." Prof. Snape explained knowingly, raising an eyebrow at him.

Harry scowled to himself but didn't say anything, inwardly blaming Draco for having Prof. Snape accost him on personal matters like this. He never did enjoy the feeling of other people worrying or being concerned about him... it made him feel so weak and delicate... He was far from it. He could handle anything... He didn't need any help.

"Prof., I would tell you if I did have any problems bothering me right now but I assure you, I *don't*. I'm *fine*. As fine as I ever could be." Harry said firmly, managing a smirk to reassure him but Snape wasn't buying any of it.

"Harry, ever since your sister was placed into that coma-like state, you have been keeping at a cold, distance from all your Slytherin friends and coming to class with dark circles under your eyes. Is *that* what you would define as *fine*?" Snape asked sarcastically, giving him a mocking sneer.

Harry's eyes flashed instantly as he rounded on Snape, the hidden anger and frustration inside him momentarily exploding within his veins as he spoke.

"Hey, *sod off*, would you?! I'm not some basket case that you should all be keeping surveillance over! I tell you, I'm fine now leave me the hell alone!" He exploded, slamming his hand down angrily on the table.

Snape didn't flinch or react at all but the anger in his eyes but enough for Harry to look away instantly, his cheeks reddening in not only anger but also embarrassment at having exploded at his teacher like that.

Neither of the two spoke for a long moment, silence being the dominant feeling in the room before Harry finally dared to look up, keeping his expression calm and neutral.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to explode like that." He said flatly, not meeting Snape's eyes as he said it but Snape shook his head and sighed, burying his face into his hands to hide his weary look.

Another long moment of silence followed, this time, with Harry shifting around uncomfortably as he sensed the tension and impatience radiating from his professor, wanting nothing more than to leave without having to face it.

After a couple more silent minutes, Harry finally stood up, adjusting his robes and running a suave hand through his perfectly-styled raven hair as he spoke up in an almost reluctant voice.

"Well, if that's all professor, I'll be going now... I wouldn't want to miss out on anything." He drawled slowly, his voice devoid of any emotion but Prof. Snape snapped his head back up, his black eyes glittering maliciously.

"*Sit* down, Mr. Potter before I use one of the unforgivables just to make you listen to me in the proper way you should be!" He hissed angrily, this time causing Harry's eyes to widen in fear before he immediately sat back down in nervousness.

Snape's left eye twitched but he looked away and took a deep breath to calm himself, masking his impatience with a cold sneer again before turning back to look at Harry, who was now glaring at him angrily.

"No offense sir but what is the real reason you have brought me here? There are honestly much more things I would rather be spending my time on. I don't like discussing the more personal aspects of my life like this." Harry said, coldly, for the first time to his favorite teacher.

Snape allowed a small smirk to grace his face, nodding at the annoyed tone in his star pupil's harsh voice, silently marveling to himself how much Harry did seem to take after his mother despite looking like his father physically.

"If you must know, Harry, the headmaster has personally informed me of his concern in your behavior recently... Sneaking around at

nighttimes, stirring up trouble among some schoolmates and causing violent fights against our school guests..." Prof. Snape smirked wider as his voice trailed off, leaving Harry staring at him in surprise.

"Tell me Harry, what exactly is it about Viktor Krum that caused you to attack him like such yesterday? You're not the type who usually goes all out for making a fool out of himself in front of the entire school." Snape commented casually.

Harry's eyes flashed in indignation as he looked at Snape in righteous anger and insult. "Hey! Professor, that bastard seriously had it coming! How he struts around the bloody school like he owns the bloody place! I just put him in his rightful place." Harry muttered, rolling his eyes.

Snape couldn't help laughing at the look on Harry's face, nodding in agreement. "Yes, I know that Harry but Dumbledore just wanted to make sure that you wouldn't be pulling a stunt like that sometime in the future. We wouldn't want Karkaroff upset now would we?" He added, leering as he thought of the headmaster mentioned.

"No... We wouldn't want *that* to happen..." Harry said sarcastically, a sadistic sneer on his face similar to the one Snape had on at that exact moment, the two forming the perfect image of true Slytherins through and through.

Snape blinked and shook himself out of it, turning to raise both his eyebrows at Harry expectantly. "But tell me though, Harry, is that really the *only* reason you hate Viktor Krum so much?" He asked, gazing at the suddenly uneasy boy across from him.

Harry shifted in his seat uncomfortably, refusing to meet his head of house's eyes as a faint tinge of pink was fairly noticeable on his pale features, causing the eyebrows on Snape's face to rise up even more.

Deciding he'd rather not know more about the issue, he shook his head and held back a laugh, finding the effect the question seemed to have on the popular Slytherin rather amusing on his part.

"So, anyway... I never got around to telling you, well done on the second task Harry. We, your housemates and I, are all proud of you

as our champion. Probably a bit foolish on the part about not taking the advantage of seeing the hostages first but successful nevertheless.” Snape said, nodding at him.

Harry nodded as well but couldn’t help but feel a bit sheepish once again as he thought of how he could have made it as first place but he brushed the thought away, shaking his head.

Snape’s eyes suddenly narrowed, however, as he turned to look at Harry again, a slightly suspicious look on his face. “However... I couldn’t help but notice though, Harry... That the method you used, Gillyweed, was one of the ingredients stolen from my office... Now did you—”

“Yes, Professor. I was the one who took it without your proper permission.” Harry interrupted before Snape could finish, knowing that if Snape found out that it had been Dobby, the house-elf, who had taken the ingredient, the elf would have been sacked for sure.

*I’ve always had a soft spot for that little idiot...* He thought to himself in annoyance, rolling his eyes at how noble and selfless he was being at that very moment.

There was one thing that was bothering him though, however, when he had thought about Dobby’s offered help earlier that morning... He had remembered of course, that it had been Mr. Crouch whom he had seen rummaging around Prof. Snape’s office that night AJ had been attacked...

If it had been Mr. Crouch who had stolen all those ingredients, including the Gillyweed, and that potion, then how is it that Dobby had gotten hold of the Gillyweed to give it to him yesterday? It all just didn’t seem to add up properly... Although he couldn’t be too sure...

*No... I remember... It was ‘Mr. Crouch’ who had stolen that potion... I saw it with my own eyes on the marauder’s map... Even Moody affirmed it... Dobby must have gotten the Gillyweed from someone else or ‘he’ must have stolen the Gillyweed while Crouch must have only stolen the potion...* Harry thought, biting his lip in thought.

“Harry? Harry!”

Harry blinked and turned to face Prof. Snape's annoyed face, embarrassed that he had been caught off guard once again. "I'm sorry, Professor, what did you say?"

Prof. Snape raised an eyebrow, giving him a suspicious look. "I asked, Harry, if you by any chance had seen exactly *who* had stolen the draught of endless sleep that night... I still find it rather hard to accept that it was Barty Crouch who was in my office."

Harry sighed impatiently, trying very hard to not explode once again as he spoke up.

"Professor, I think I would very much remember who it was that night and I am positive that it was Barty Crouch. You could go ask Moody yourself... Crouch did it... He almost killed my sister..." He hissed darkly, his eyes glinting in a strange sense of malevolence.

Snape, despite himself, winced at the harsh, frightening look in Harry's eye, knowing that the young Slytherin had a tendency to scare him at certain times with the uneasy aura he felt off him.

"Harry, we can't be too sure of that yet... We don't have any thing on Crouch except for the fact that he had been in my office that night... We can't be sure if he was really the one who stole the potion." Snape explained calmly but Harry snapped his head to look at him, his eyes blazing.

"What do you mean by that Professor?! What more proof do you need that the bastard tried to kill my twin sister?! I thought you of all people would understand that!" Harry raged, his eyes narrowing and his form tensing in anger.

"Harry... I *do* understand where all your anger is coming from and personally, I *do* believe that Crouch is responsible but Dumbledore is insisting that we conduct a further investigation on this..." Snape continued, taking a deep breath.

Harry didn't look convinced as he got up and pounded his fist on the table, earning nothing more than a raised eyebrow from the watching potions master in front of him.



“What is there to investigate professor?! I want the proper punishment for the person who did this to my twin sister! I don’t need to wait for any investigations!” Harry ranted in fury, his eyes blazing darkly that it caused Snape felt a twinge of fear erupt from inside him.

“I know that Harry... Don’t worry, AJ will be fine, I assure you. I can’t be sure of when she will wake up at this point but—”

“No! Professor, you don’t understand! She’s not fine! *I’m* not fine! Don’t you get it?! She has to wake up! I need her! I feel empty without her! I can’t wait like this! I need her *now!*” Harry blurted out, slumping down onto his chair and burying his face into his hands.

Snape didn’t say anything but watched as Harry took a deep shaky breath, clenching his hands tightly into angry fists to control his temper as he kept his head down, refusing to meet his professor’s gaze.

“You don’t understand, Professor... No one does... AJ’s my only family... She’s my only sibling... I can’t stand the feeling of being alone... I don’t like the feeling of knowing that now; even *she’s* been taken away from me.” Harry whispered, his voice hoarse and shaky.

Snape nodded but kept silent, knowing that he had a better chance of getting the Slytherin to talk if he didn’t say anything at all since Harry had a habit of blurting out things when left to his own thoughts.

Harry didn’t say anything else though as he just took another shaky breath and raised his head up, wiping away a stray tear from the corner of his eyes before he set his face into a cold, sneering mask, leaving no trace of his emotions.

He let out a mild amused laugh at himself, shaking his head at his own sudden outburst. “Excuse me, Professor... I don’t know what came over me... Forget I ever said that.” He said, giving Snape a relaxed smirk.

Snape didn’t look convinced but sighed and gave Harry an odd, calculating look, marveling at how Harry had seemed to master the art of masking his emotions even better than he himself did, and he had been hiding his emotions all his life.

“Harry, as I have told you before, AJ will be fine. The potion she ingested was only phase 1... But you have to understand, Harry... It will take time... Though she only took in a little of the potion, its effects are still strong.” Snape said, trying to ease the Slytherin down.

“I know that Professor. Hopefully though, I can find some way to let her know I’m there... More or less, I’m pretty sure it was me she last thought of...” Harry said, a thoughtful look on his features.

Snape peered down at him closely, his eyebrows fusing together but he didn’t bother pushing the topic any further, trying to direct his attention to another subject.

“I see... Well Harry... I have to say I’m worried about you... Your behavior lately has seemed rather... *Peculiar*... Is there something going on you haven’t told me?” Snape asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Harry shifted under Snape’s suspicious glare, trying hard not to wince as he thought of all that had happened since the start of the school year, including the bet and him being involved with Hermione. He knew Snape wouldn’t approve, to say the least... And he definitely had no intention of him finding out earlier than needed...

“Nothing Professor... Everything’s fine... I’ve just been a bit...*stressed* over the TriWizard tournament. I assure you, I’m fine.” Harry said stiffly, not liking the idea of having someone concerned over him.

Snape sighed, suddenly looking about five years older to Harry with his weary and tired expression but he continued talking, extinguishing any hope Harry had left of avoiding any more questions he might have asked.

“Harry, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about... The merpeople in the lake, they told me some rather interesting things you did down there... They informed me that you seemed to have used advanced magic during the task.” Snape started, looking at him intently.

Harry's eyes widened in panic as he realized what Snape was just about to talk to him about. *Fuck...*

"That was not what caught my attention though, Harry... What caught my attention was the fact that.. Well, you have used dark magic when you knew very well the consequences you might have faced. Where did you learn dark magic Harry?" Snape asked, his face blank and emotionless.

Harry stiffened, keeping his face hard and stubborn, not wanting to cave in into telling his professor that he and Draco had been self-studying how to perform dark magic ever since the beginning of their third year.

Snape sighed again and looked at Harry with a stern glare, looking neither angry nor disappointed but surprisingly, worried.

"I'm not going to tell you to stop learning the dark arts Harry or to prevent you from learning it because frankly, I wouldn't have any right to do that since I myself have learned it even earlier than you have... but..." Snape let his voice trailed off as a dark look came across his pale features.

"I just want you to be aware of the consequences and the responsibilities that come along with learning the dark arts... Mind you, Harry, though it is very powerful, it is extremely dangerous and the abilities you learn should not be abused. You have to possess a great sense of control in order to use it... You should not use it to your full advantage." Snape continued, keeping his eyes trained on Harry's darkening eyes.

"To be able to have the magical power and capacity to learn such spells is both a gift and a curse. It gives you the power yet it gives you something else... A thirst... A thirst to cause death and suffering... It is important that you do not get hooked onto learning it, Harry... Taking it too seriously and letting it control your entire self and life is the reason why wizards become evil in the first place. It exactly is what drove the dark lord to the brink of insanity." Snape finished, his voice a soft whisper.

Harry's eyes glowed in a strange eerie light as he took in his professor's words, feeling the familiar feeling of darkness sweep over him as he pondered their meaning.

"Some wizards are just too taken in with the prospect of gaining that much power that they think of nothing else... They forget about everything and everyone in their life for that power. That kind of addiction is what caused Salazar Slytherin and Voldemort to delve into such evil.. And some wizards to join Voldemort as well." He said, shuddering as Harry briefly blinked, surprised that Snape had said the dark lord's name out loud.

"Take my advice Harry, stop while you still can. There are other ways to become a powerful and skilled wizard. This is not one of the best options... Trust me, it's from a personal experience." He added softly, a dark look in his eyes before he shook it away, turning to give Harry a grin.

"Anyway, enough of that Harry. Let's get down to more important matters..." Snape said hastily, coughing and shuffling the papers on his desk to draw Harry's attention away but Harry was still looking intently at him, his eyebrows fused in thought.

*What could Prof. Snape have meant by that? Was he as involved as I was in all this dark magic before? Why does he seem to be terrified of it now?* He wondered vaguely, trying to think of a possible reason but he found none, confusing himself even more.

Snape had been right though... And he knew it... He knew that he was in for something extremely dangerous but what seemed to frighten him more was that he didn't seem to care. All he wanted was to have more power... To have such power seemed to give him a strange sense of strength and comfort...

Just the knowledge of himself having the ability to defend himself with his stock of dark spells was enough to ensure him of never again experiencing the same kind of torture, mockery and humiliation he had once had to experience as a child...

*Never again...* He thought darkly, remembering how his pride had been crushed to the point of having a severe effect on his personality

whenever Dudley and his gang had used him as a mere punching bag for their amusement.

Feeling disgusted and ashamed at the humiliating memory, he shook it away, willing himself never to remember that old disgusting weak self that he used to be ever again. He was different now. He was a different Harry than before... That weak Harry was gone and he would *make sure* he never came back... *never*...

Harry blinked out of his daze just as Snape straightened up in his seat and stared at him directly, a stern and grim expression on his much older features.

"Now, Harry... I need to ask you one last time, was it or was it not Barty Crouch who had broken into my office to supposedly steal the potion?" Snape asked, his eyes telling Harry he already knew the answer.

"I'm absolutely sure, Prof. If you don't want to believe me, you can even give me a sample of Veritaserum just in case... I *know* what, or rather, *who*, I saw." Harry said stubbornly, glaring at him in response.

"That won't be necessary... I believe you Harry. That is all, you may go now to your class now." Snape said abruptly, waving him off as Harry inwardly let out a breath of relief, getting up from his seat instantly.

"Oh and Harry—"

Harry whirled around to see Prof. Snape giving him a look of warning, his eyes boring right through Harry's tense, uncomfortable frame.

"Tell no one of this talk... Not even Draco... Nothing leaves this office, understand?" He asked sharply, glaring at him as Harry nodded slowly, his face blankly curious.

As Harry turned to go, Snape spoke up again, this time, an amused tone dripping from his voice. "Oh and do ask my permission the next time you intend on borrowing some potion ingredients, okay Harry?" He asked, smirking.

Harry looked over his shoulder and easily returned the smirk, shrugging and silently thankful that Snape didn't seem to be pressing any further on the subject. "I will professor." He said, nodding.

Prof. Snape returned the gesture with a lopsided smile but not without leaving Harry with his last words which seemed to linger in his mind for a long moment...

"Watch yourself Harry... Be more alert... I have a feeling the storm is still yet to come..."

Hermione walked cautiously into the Great Hall that same morning, her eyebrows coming to meet together as her entrance was met by the gaze of nearly everyone in the hall, a tense silence coming over the four house tables.

Feeling a bit nervous, she raised her eyes to meet Malfoy's sneering face across the hall, confused as to see him laughing with Crabbe and Goyle, the three Slytherins pointing to something they were reading on the table.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at them before letting them roam around the rest of the table, finally seeing Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls all laughing shrilly at something they were reading as well, shooting occasional glances at her direction.

Pansy stopped laughing however, when she saw her and grabbed the article away from Lila's hands, pulling the girl along with her as they made a straight beeline towards the brown-haired Gryffindor.

Hermione barely noticed them at all, too busy looking in confusion at all the other students, most especially the girls, all giggling and pointing at her, whispering about her as they all seemed to be pointing at the same piece of paper in amusement.

Most of the other girls however, were glaring very darkly at her with a look of pure hatred in their eyes, their hands clenching a roll of paper very tightly in their hands as though they had wanted to strangle it, pretending it was her neck.

Now feeling a cold sense of dread at the way everyone was leering and laughing at her behind her back up until now, she glanced back towards the Gryffindor table to see Parvati sneering at her haughtily, an evil, malicious and sadistic gleam in her eye while Ron and Seamus both seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

Lavender was surprisingly maintaining a distance from Parvati but was also looking at Hermione in curiosity and question, her eyes widening more and more as she read the article in her hands.

*Why is everyone laughing at me like this?! I feel like I have a sign on my back that says "Look! I'm in love with Prof. Snape" for Merlin's sake! What the hell is their problem? What's with all this public ridicule?!* She thought angrily, turning around just in time to have Pansy hurl something at her, hitting her square on the face.

Pansy and Lila both burst into a round of amused giggles, shooting each other a look as Hermione scowled and yanked the newspaper they had thrown off her, giving them both a frown of dislike.

"What is this about, Parkinson? I don't have any time for your games today." Hermione snapped, giving them a hateful glare as Pansy let out a mocking smile, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"I'd think it'd be better if you just read the article, Granger. I think that pretty much explains everything else." She said smugly, smirking at her again before she and Lila sashayed back to their table, leaving Hermione gaping at them like an idiot.

*What on earth could they be talking about?! What does this newspaper have to do with—*Hermione broke off her own thoughts in shock as she saw the picture printed right on the newspaper of her in her gown during the Yule Ball.

The newspaper article showed a clear shot of her and Harry in a passionate embrace in the Hogwarts gardens and what was worse was that right next to that photo was another one of her but this time with Viktor Krum as the two were dancing that night.

Hermione felt her heart start pounding in her chest as the harsh whispers and laughter around her began ringing louder in her ears, finally allowing her to hear the words they were saying out loud.

“Hermione goody-two-shoes Granger?! I didn’t know she was such a *slut!*”

“How disgraceful... It would be so much like a muggleborn witch to be trying to muster up to both champions at the same time... Disgusting...”

“She’s such a whore! She thinks she can get *both* Harry Potter and Viktor Krum to herself? She doesn’t deserve men like them!

“Why should a no good, nobody and slut like her deserve the cream of the crop?! She thinks she’s so hot! She’s cheating on both of them!”

“I’m betting she’s only after them for their money... Or their popularity at least... She had been planning on getting the both of them all along... Seems she’s after the rich bachelors...”

Hermione couldn’t bear to hear anymore... Mustering up the only amount of dignity she knew she had left, she forced herself to meet their gaze steadily, not wanting to break down in front of them.

She spun on her heel and bolted out of the Great Hall, running as fast as she could to wherever her feet would take her and not bothering to apologize to the people she bumped into. As she ran, she was able to see the harsh, disgusted sneers they were throwing at her as she passed.

Finally out of breath, she collapsed against the wall of a dark, deserted corridor in exhaustion, the newspaper article still clutched tightly in her fisted hand, as though she was afraid of reading what was inside.

Harry’s words came back to haunt her at that moment, filling Hermione with a strong sense of realization and dread as she pondered their real meaning.



*“That bitch will be after you next you know...”*

*And how right you were, Harry...She thought, taking a deep breath before she raised the newspaper article, fully aware that the ever so wonderful writer was none other than Rita Skeeter herself.*

### **A Perfect Boy's Mistake by Rita Skeeter**

*—I guess it would be safe to say that Harry James Potter, well-known boy-who-lived and handsome young teenager, currently attending his fourth year at Hogwarts, has finally met his match in the gorgeous and intelligent fellow Hogwarts student, Hermione Anne Granger—writes Rita Skeeter, special correspondent. After countless experiences with several other girls in the year, all of which have proven to be rather unsatisfactory to Mr. Potter's liking, he has at last finally found a worthy girl in Ms. Granger, whom of course, is also currently attending the same year as the said Slytherin.*

*Hermione Granger, despite being a muggleborn witch, has proven herself to be rather worthy of the handsome hero's prized affections as the girl is said to be the most intelligent student of the year and now, thanks to a recent alteration of her appearance, one of the most beautiful as well. However, one of the main factors hindering her and Mr. Potter's relationship is the fact that Ms. Granger, though incredibly clever, is a Gryffindor as opposed to Mr. Potter being a Slytherin and as everyone is fully aware, it is most unlikely that a Slytherin and Gryffindor should ever get along, much more coexist as a couple.*

*Another factor is of course, the fact that Ms. Granger is the said rival of Mr. Potter's twin sister, Amanda Jane “AJ” Potter, which can prove to be rather harmful when the said Slytherin wakes up from her coma-like state. The two girls are said to have a heated animosity between them in school and among their two different houses. Ms. Granger, though a plain and simple girl at first glance, according to rumors, is one who is actually much more manipulative and conniving than Ms. Potter herself. Though there was no actual public declaration of her and Harry's status as a couple, several affirmations can be derived from some suspicions made that the two were indeed, secretly dating.*

*That all seemed to change however, after the arrival of none other than popular Quidditch player Viktor Krum into the scene. Now the rightful champion of Durmstrang Academy, it seems the Quidditch player has somehow won the interest and the eye of our pretty Gryffindor and she soon found herself engaging in a secret relationship with the Quidditch player as well, realizing that even the boy-who-lived could not satisfy her intense desire for rich and famous wizards with a powerful family name and clan. It can even be affirmed that Mr. Krum has invited Ms. Granger to stay with him over the summer because he insists that he has “never felt this way about any other girl”. Ms. Granger has then been toying with both boys’ affections.*

*“She’s had an eye on Harry for years now but this was the only time Harry actually paid her any attention. I’m telling you, it’s a love spell, he ‘never’ would have liked her on his own.” Says pretty and vivacious Pansy Parkinson of Slytherin house.*

*“Yeah, she’s flirted with me a few times as well but I never entertained her. I’m way too trained to fall for her cheap charms.” Says son of Lucius Malfoy—Draco, Harry’s well-known best friend and another rich, pureblooded wizard of the same year.*

Hermione felt her eyes sting at the harsh words of the article directed towards her but she held them back, angrily wiping them away with the back of her hand, willing herself not to cry over something as silly as rumors like this one.

*This is nothing, Hermione. Just ignore them, it’ll be fine... You know it’s not true so there’s no reason to get all worked up... Let her try and ruin my reputation... it won’t work at all.* She told herself, nodding in affirmation and wiping the tears away from her eyes.

Shutting her eyes tightly, she rested her back heavily on the cold wall behind her, using it to support her weight as she took deep shaky breaths to calm herself. Taking the newspaper article in her hand, she slowly crumpled the offending piece of paper into an angry ball, hurling it across from her.

*How dare they... Spreading lies about me... 'us' behind our back... Could they be less honorable?!* She thought bitterly as another tear seemed to have escaped her and began rolling down her pale cheek.

Suddenly exhausted, she slowly let herself slide down the wall until she was sitting in a fetal position on the floor, her back still against the wall behind her as she buried her head in her hands.

Then without warning, the sobs she didn't know she had inside all came tumbling out of her as she cried softly onto her arms, not caring at that moment who dared to see her in such a weak position.

It seemed that at that very moment, she wanted nothing more than to have Harry's strong arms wrapped around her frail, shaky form... To hear his soft words of comfort echoing in her ear... To have him whisper to her that everything was alright... That he didn't believe any of those lies... That he still loved her no matter what...

Hermione hiccupped softly, wrapping her arms tighter around her curled legs as she continued to cry quietly against the cold, unforgiving wall, somehow feeling more lost and lonely than she had ever been in her whole life.

"Stop crying..." She whispered, gently wiping a falling tear from her cheek as she finally allowed her eyes to open slowly, her vision blurred from the tears.

It seemed at first that only the wind had answered her by blowing softly against her face, causing the stray strands of brown hair to fly softly around her face but that thought was soon extinguished when she heard a harsh, mocking voice speak up from behind her.

"Aw... How sickeningly sweet...Crying to herself like a pathetic little wimp... *disgusting...*"

Hermione froze for a long moment, biting her lip before she turned around, finally seeing none other than Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle standing right behind her, Malfoy having a sadistic smile on his face.

Malfoy seemed to sense her slight nervousness as his smile grew wider, his eyes glinting in a strange sense of amusement and triumph over the weak image Hermione seemed to form at that moment.

“What’s wrong mudblood? Can’t take the pressure already? Don’t you be giving up so soon, the fun’s just starting...That was only the beginning of your upcoming humiliation.” Malfoy drawled, chuckling.

Hermione didn’t say anything but the glare she had on her face told him everything he needed to know. She wouldn’t play his cheap game... She didn’t need to listen to anything that git said...

Nothing he said mattered. She had already decided... From now on, she wouldn’t be the fool... She wouldn’t doubt her own emotions just because of what other people say to her... Then that would prove that she was just as bad as Harry was before.

She didn’t need to doubt herself *or* Harry because of what other people think... Nothing else mattered except them... Whatever rumors had been formed against them, she didn’t need to say anything about them. She knew the truth. Only Harry mattered to her now...

“What do you want Malfoy?” Hermione asked coldly, her eyes harsh and unrelenting at him, causing Draco to smirk in spite of himself, shaking his head.

“You didn’t really think Harry was really serious about you did you? You *slut*... Although I have to give you credit... You used Potter’s own game against him... Going after Viktor Krum... I didn’t think you had it in you Granger...” Malfoy continued, causing a sharp pang to seize right through Hermione’s chest.

“What the hell are you talking about Malfoy? You big stupid git... I don’t have to take any of this crap from you.” She snapped angrily but Malfoy didn’t flinch at all, merely raising an eyebrow at her irritation.

“You *do* have some Slytherin qualities inside that Gryffindor heart of yours... Although I’m a bit surprised how you found out early about Harry’s intentions and turned it against him.” He said, nodding for Crabbe and Goyle to walk on without him.

Hermione's eyes clouded over in confusion at him as she slowly stood up from where she was sitting on the floor and walked over to the Slytherin so that they were standing face to face.

"Leave it alone, Malfoy... I do *not* have to take this intolerable crap from delusional jerks like *you*..." She whispered, her voice so soft that it was barely audible but Draco somehow seemed to understand her words.

He just smirked at her, slowly setting the eyebrow he had raised down before turning away calmly from the Gryffindor as though she was some mere object he didn't want to bother himself with.

"Go back to Gryffindor, *slut*... Save yourself the rest of your humiliation... Keep the rest of your dignity." He said, trying to walk away but Hermione grasped his arm tightly, causing him to turn around in surprise.

Before he knew what was happening, she had raised her hand and had slapped him hard on the cheek, immediately causing the blonde to gasp in surprise and stumble back from her in pain, nearly crashing to the floor.

Eyes flashing, he snapped his head back and glared poisonously at her with one hand covering his red, stinging cheek, his jaw hanging open in disbelief and his face a look of pure shock and dismay.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at the expression on his face, lifting one corner of her mouth into a full-blown smirk that would have made Harry hang his head down in shame.

Malfoy, if possible, flushed darker in anger and righted himself back up immediately, giving Hermione an angry sneer. "Why you good-for-nothing, self-righteous bitch... You dare to slap *me*? You dared to touch *me* considering that you're nothing but a filthy, worthless, pathetic mudblood—"

"You bastard... You planned this didn't you? You arranged for that article to happen somehow!" Hermione interrupted his hissed drawl calmly in realization, giving Draco her most furious glare.

The silver in Draco's eyes flashed in indignation as he stepped forward and stared her down, intimidating the girl with his height as a hideous snarl formed on his features.

"I did no such vile thing, Granger. *I* gave *some* information to Rita Skeeter but I did not arrange for this. Can you really blame me if I refuse to see my best and closest friend waste his life on something as worthless as you all because of *me*?" He exploded angrily, his hands now tightly clenched.

Hermione took a step back from the enraged Slytherin in slight apprehension, not liking the idea of being too close to someone who had just about the same amount of temper Harry had himself but soon gasped when she bumped into a rather hard chest behind her.

Whirling around, she found herself staring right at Harry's concerned handsome face, his emerald green eyes sparkling in question at her teary eyes but as soon as he saw Draco standing there, his eyes seemed to mask themselves and he let a glare cross his face.

"What? What's going on here? What are you doing here, Draco?" He asked sharply, turning to give Draco a threatening look but Draco just sneered back coldly, taking something rolled-up from his robe pocket and hurling it at Harry.

"Here! Read that damn article Harry and figure out exactly *how* innocent that *slut* your fond of so much is! Then probably you'll realize it wasn't only her who had been acting like a complete fool!" He spat out, shaking his head at him as Harry caught the article in mid-air.

Hermione winced as Harry unrolled the newspaper article slowly, looking up to give Draco one of his irritated looks. "Malfoy, what the fuck is this about? And why the bloody hell do you have to include Her—I mean, *Granger*, in this—"

Hermione bit her lip and watched as Harry cut off his own words at the sight of the article and the pictures, his eyes both widening and filling with anger at the same time, his fingers suddenly clutching the newspaper article very tightly in rage.

Draco carefully fingered his cheek but leered at Harry's violently tensing form, seeing the same frightening anger erupt from his best friend's eyes and the same well-known aura wash over Harry whenever the raven-haired Slytherin was extremely pissed about something.

Harry's eyes glazed over in immense hurt as a sharp, stinging pang he had never experienced before in his life began burning in his chest, causing him to shut his eyes tightly in pain.

*No... It can't be... All this time I thought I was the only one with a sin... I've been beating myself up about this and yet... I find out... The one person who really deserves the guilt is Hermione herself... No... Damn her... Damn her!* He thought, his fists trembling in hurt and rage.

*Damn her!! She actually played me using my own game! She led me around like some stupid fool! She made me believe in 'love'...I have never been more disgusted at myself than I am right now...* He thought, feeling a queasy feeling in his stomach.

*Is this what the law of karma is all about? I played with girls before... But I actually loved her... For real... And now I'm the one with the hurt, the humiliation and the pain... I never should have let this happen in the first place!* Harry thought, feeling a trickle of blood run down from his tightly clenched fist but he didn't even feel the pain.

*She made me believe that she loved me!* Harry raged silently, wishing at that very moment that he had gone along with the bet and had gotten romantically attached to the Gryffindor at all.

"Harry—"

Hermione didn't even get the words out as Harry snapped his head back up and used his strong arms to slam her painfully against the wall, causing even Draco's eyes to widen in surprise and Hermione to cry out in fear and pain.

"Harry—"

*"Shut up...you... Slut!"* He hissed, raising the newspaper article up to her eyes before he violently hurled it back down to the floor, causing Hermione to cringe once again at the venom she heard in his voice.

Hermione struggled against him more out of desperation than anything else, not liking the evident and uncontrollable anger she was seeing in his emerald green eyes and not liking the cold, hateful way Harry was staring at her.

"Harry! You bastard, what the hell do you think you're doing?! You're hurting me, let me go, dammit!" She yelled out, trying to shove him away but Harry's arms felt like iron around her, caging her between his own form and the wall behind her.

"Leave Draco... Now... I know what to do... *Leave...*" Harry said coldly, his voice calm but Draco had to wince again, nodding slowly before he turned and but he didn't walk away, merely not wanting to look back at the scene.

Somehow, he didn't know why but he knew he had wanted this to happen... He wanted Harry to realize his own foolishness and remind him about their bet in the first place...

He had not wanted Harry to throw away the perfect reputation they had built for themselves until now but after seeing the pained look on his best friend's face.. He wasn't so sure if he was proud of what he did anymore...

Harry was of course; his best friend and Draco cared for him like a brother... He couldn't have just sat around and watched as Harry destroyed not only his reputation but also *theirs* as the popular Slytherin duo just for the sake of this mudblood girl...

Even if the bet was entirely his fault, he had wanted Harry to win from the very start anyway... Perhaps he had been a little bit too harsh on him ... He had expected too much from Harry... He had expected too much that he thought Harry could come out of any relationship without falling in love but he forgot one thing...

Though his best friend was Harry Potter and was one of the most influential and feared Slytherins in the entire school, he was still



*human...* He still had a tendency to lose sometimes...He had never expected his great and proud best friend to lose to a girl like Hermione Granger of all people... It had been the last thing on his mind.

*And perhaps... I had not only been unreasonable but also selfish as well...* He thought, shaking his head. He had not wanted Harry to risk staining their hard-earned identity in school... He did not want Harry to make a fool of himself because he had been afraid that it might have reflected on him and on their house as well.

Maybe he was just being your average close-minded Slytherin who had not liked the new idea of mingling with the other students from other houses, most especially Gryffindors... He had not welcomed the idea at all...

And he hated the very idea that the reason this was happening to Harry was all because of him making up that stupid bet in the first place. No, he was not losing his best friend to that girl... He was about to let her covet him to her filthy side.

Harry was the only true best friend he had ever had and they had made a pact when they were younger that they would always be on the same side no matter what... There was no way in hell that Draco was ever going to let some silly little muggle-born witch break that pact between them.

*Besides... Isn't it we also promised each other before... That if one would suffer, then so would the other... Why should he deserve happiness now while my own life is miserable... If I can't have AJ... Then he can't have Granger... Then neither of us would be alone in the end.* He thought selfishly, his eyes glistening with guilt and regret.

"Draco, dammit! Didn't you hear me?! Sod off!" Harry snapped angrily, turning to give Draco a glare as Draco finally sighed and forced himself to walk away, his eyes darkening.

As soon as Draco had rounded the corner, Harry had turned his icy green eyes back to Hermione's wide ones, causing a twinge of fear and hurt to rise up in Hermione's chest at seeing the emptiness she found there.

“You...*Slut*...You good-for-nothing, manipulative *slut*... How dare you... Were you actually using that pure, conservative, simple girl act all along to reel me in?! Who the hell do you think you are?!” Harry hissed dangerously as venomous as that of a snake, his eyes glowing in a malicious sort of anger Hermione had never seen before.

“Harry, think about what you’re saying! You know as well as I do that I would never—”

“Oh do I now?! Seems I can’t really tell the truth about you anymore, *Hermione*! Were you just the same as Parvati and Pansy and all those other girls?! Did you not really care about me?! Was I only some prized trophy that you wanted to win?!” Harry asked again, this time his voice heavy with not only anger but also trembling with pain, his eyes glistening in the darkness.

“Harry! Please! I’m not like them at all! If you would only listen—”

“Tell me the truth, Hermione! Do you really love me?! Or was everything in that article true?! That I can’t satisfy you? That you were only setting me up deliberately to fall for you?! What more do you want from me, Hermione?! What more do you want?! You already have my heart...my trust... My pride and dignity... What more do you want? I already gave you everything didn’t I?” Harry asked, his voice cracking.

“I *do* love you, Harry! Don’t believe whatever that article! I only—”

“What does Krum have that I didn’t give you?! Fine, if it’s really that important to you, then let’s tell everyone! Happy?! Just please tell me that you don’t feel anything for that bastard... You can’t leave me now Hermione... I can’t lose you now... Not now that I’ve fallen for you...” Harry pleaded softly, now cupping Hermione’s cheek gently and turning her face towards his, allowing her to see the pleading and heartbreaking look of stubbornness in his eyes.

“Harry...” She whispered, using one hand to gently push away the lock of raven hair that had fallen into his eyes, finally allowing her to see the single tear that had fallen down his cheek.

“If you got did this to me only to leave me in the end, then you never should have let me fall for you... you never should have let me love you like this... Because I’m in too deep now... I can’t escape from it anymore... Damn you, Granger!” He blurted out, angrily wiping away the tear from his cheek.

This time, Hermione felt a rush of anger overwhelm her as she tried to push him away, looking up to meet his eyes in an accusatory glare which Harry met easily in challenge.

“So that’s it, Potter?! You’re actually going to believe those jerks over me?! Dammit Harry, if I say I didn’t do it, then I *didn’t* do it! You have to believe me! I would never lie to you! You know that! Don’t tell me you’re going to take Skeeter’s word over mine? You’re nothing but a weak, pathetic excuse—”

Before Harry could stop himself, he had raised his fist and had slammed it right into Hermione’s beautiful face, causing the girl to stop midsentence and to gasp in pain, a small cry issuing from her lips.

Harry’s eyes widened immediately, his anger momentarily forgotten as his eyes clouded over at seeing Hermione’s eyes shut tight in a wince of pain, shocked at himself for his sudden outburst of temper.

*I hit her... I actually hit her...* He thought, his hands trembling in fear as Hermione didn’t seem to be opening her eyes, turning her face away from him and beginning to cry softly but not out of the pain but out of his sudden act of hostility towards her.

Harry bit his lip, not knowing how to react as Hermione’s form began to tremble in his arms, her pale porcelain cheek now beginning to turn a harsh purple from the impact of his punch.

“H-Hermione... I-I... I’m sorry... I—” Harry cut himself off as Hermione’s trembling seemed to intensify, the tears now rolling continuously down her cheek as she cried softly, still unwilling to open her eyes and look at him.

Harry sighed, turning away from the heart wrenching sight in guilt and shame at himself, shutting his eyes as well before he finally used his

hand to gently push Hermione's face into his chest, allowing the girl to cry against him.

Her sobs seemed to increase as she buried her face into his chest, causing another annoying sharp pang to pierce through his gut as he wrapped his arms around her frail form, pulling her body closer to his for comfort.

How *could* he react? This was the first time Hermione had actually cried like *this* in front of him and just the fact that it had been him to make her cry like this was enough a punishment for him already... It seemed every harsh cry that came out of her lips was like a dagger to his heart...

He let out a shaky breath and began stroking her hair, not knowing the right words he could have said at that moment which could have comforted the girl in his arms... He wasn't at all used to having such emotions portrayed in front of him... He didn't know much about it at all...

"Shh... Don't cry... I'm sorry...I... I'm not going to hurt you anymore... Just don't cry..." He hushed awkwardly, pressing his lips gently to her forehead in a tender caress of comfort, causing Hermione's sobs to weaken as she tightened her arms around him in response.

"Harry... Please believe me... Please don't listen to those rumors... Believe in *me*... Don't hate me... I *love* you Harry...*Only* you..." She whispered shakily, her body still convulsing with harsh sobs as she spoke.

Harry didn't say anything but squeezed her tightly in response, his mind flying off to when he and Hermione had first kissed in the Hogwarts express at the beginning of the year... Though it was only a few months ago, it seemed so long ago now...

He was a completely different person then from the person that he knew he was now... Sure, nothing much has changed when it came to his attitude and manners to other people he didn't really like but... Now, he knew there was a major difference in him.

It was that from now on, there would always be a weakness in his heart for none other than Hermione and no matter how many other girls he dated or went after, he knew that none of those girls could ever fill that part of him which yearned for the innocent Gryffindor.

And as much as he can try to deny those feelings for her, Harry knew it was pretty useless. He loved her now... Things couldn't easily go back to how they were just like that... He was still the same Harry of course... His personality is still the same... his heart though, was a different story altogether.

*Dammit... Damn this... Why bother fighting anymore? I have already lost long ago...*

"I'll believe *you*, Hermione... I'll... believe you over them... If you say it isn't true, then I'll believe you... Whatever it is, Hermione... I'll believe in *only* you..." Harry finally whispered, sighing as Hermione seemed to freeze abruptly, slowly looking up to meet his gaze.

Harry looked into her pools of endless brown warmth, offering a small weak smile to calm her down as Hermione let her face collapse into his arms again, tightening her arms around him as she broke out into soft cries once more, sobbing into his chest.

"Forget them... They don't matter... All that matters is us... Just us.." Harry whispered again, brushing his lips softly against her earlobe as Hermione nodded, sniffing before lifting her head again, looking at him with complete trust and love in her eyes.

"Just us." She repeated in a quiet whisper, managing a weak smile when Harry used his thumb to caress her bruised cheek, planting a soft kiss on the offending bruise before healing it altogether with a flick of his wand.

*Just us...* She whispered to herself again, letting the single thought echo in her mind as Harry pulled her close again, closing his eyes as he rested his cheek on the top of her head in contentment.

The two stayed there for a long period of time, unmoving and clearly unwilling to separate from the other's warm embrace, not noticing the

dark figure that was watching them from the other end of the corridor, a hateful snarl on its face.

*Damn you Hermione Granger...* Parvati Patil thought as the harsh tears continued to roll down her cheeks at seeing the only boy she had actually been stupid enough to fall for holding another girl in his arms.

*Of all the boys I had dated...I just had to fall for the one who beat me at my own game... The one who seems to take in intense pleasure in hurting me...* She thought angrily, wiping the tears away as she turned and walked away, not having the guts to watch the scene any longer.

*I hate you Hermione Granger... Damn you Harry... Why did you ever have to make me love you when I knew that you would never love me in return? Why do I still want 'you' after all you've done to me?* She thought angrily.

*I'm the one who's stupid... It was nothing at the beginning... I never really 'loved' anyone before until now... Watch yourself Hermione... I don't give up just like that.* She thought, a cold sneer on her face before she finally walked away, her thoughts lingering in the silence of the corridor.

*Watch your back...*

"Where were we supposed to meet Sirius again, Harry?" Draco asked, looking around as he and Harry walked silently through a winding lane leading to a wild countryside in Hogsmeade later that day, having escaped from the rest of the Slytherins that morning.

Right after all their morning classes, the two had used Harry's invisibility cloak to escape into Hogsmeade so they could meet Sirius as he had indicated in his last letter to them, telling them to bring as much as food as they could and to make sure that they weren't being followed.

Harry hadn't spoken a word to Draco all morning ever since that incident with Hermione and this was the first time that day that the

two were actually talking to each other again, though rather awkwardly it seemed.

“Around the corner. The end of the lane.” He answered coldly, not bothering to offer any more information while Draco winced at his cold tone of voice, knowing that Harry was still pissed off at him for what he had done.

He had been entirely quiet most of the entire time they had been there even when they had given Dobby the new socks Harry had chosen especially for him that day in gratitude for the help he had given him with the second task.

The two had went down to the kitchens right after their first class only to find Winky, Mr. Crouch’s house-elf, sulking and drinking to herself in the corner, completely drunk with butterbeer and muttering nonsensical things.

Harry’s eyes had flickered in suspicion at that time as he immediately accosted the house-elf about her ex-master, trying to find some additional information about him but Winky seemed incredibly faithful.

*Stupid elf still believes that old bastard is her master...* Draco sneered, rolling his eyes as he remembered how Winky had been hiccupping and sobbing as she gulped down the remaining contents of the butterbeer in the bottle.

*That damn creature knows something...* Draco thought, his eyes narrowing as recalled Winky’s words just right before they left the kitchen.

*“Master is—hic—trusting—hic—Winky with the most important—hic—the most secret... You two is—hic—nosing, you is.”*

Draco cursed under his breath in confusion. They hadn’t gotten anything else off of Winky after that as the elf had collapsed, totally drunk onto the floor, leaving both Draco and Harry hanging at her words.

*If our suspicions are correct and that piece of crap is the one who attacked AJ... Then that secret might have something to do with it...* He thought, a heavy feeling rising in his chest at the mention of AJ.

He hadn't told Harry but he had promised her the other day that no matter what happened, he would find a way to wake her up somehow... He didn't exactly know what or how he was going to do that but he didn't care... He fully intended to keep that promise.

At least now, after talking to both an ecstatically grateful Dobby and Winky, they had come up with two new conclusions. That there is definitely something about Crouch that they needed to know and that for some reason, Crouch has finally stopped coming to the TriWizard tournament altogether.

*Maybe he's afraid of the suspicion...* Draco thought bitterly, his face twisting into a scowl and his hand clenching tightly.

Something definitely didn't feel right... Even his father knew something was up but he wouldn't disclose any information about it to anyone else except for Dumbledore no matter how much Draco pestered him about it.

With the attack on AJ now... It seems that the rest of the professors have been keeping a rather close, watchful eye on Harry, making sure the Slytherin got to all his classes safely and without harm.

It's almost as if they knew that Harry could be the next target if they had already made their move on AJ... After all, now that one Potter twin was down, why wouldn't they want to eliminate the other one as well?

"Do you have the food?" Harry asked sharply, breaking right through Draco's deep thoughts as he turned to face him with a questioning look, the two of them stopping right in the middle of the lane.

Draco blinked, confused for a split second before he nodded and gestured to the wrapped package, watching as Harry nodded again and walked on towards the huge mountain whose shadow covered the whole of Hogsmeade.



After a couple more tense, silent moments, Draco finally spoke up, trying to break the ice between them. "Harry... Talk to me, what aren't you telling me exactly? I know you're hiding something from me." Draco said, looking at him intently.

Harry didn't answer, very interested in the few cottages they were passing as they walked, their scuffling footsteps the only sound audible amongst their surroundings.

"Harry... What's going on between you and Granger? What happened this morning?" Draco continued, keeping his eyes trained on his best friend as Harry merely answered with a small forced smirk, avoiding his gaze.

"Dammit, Harry! Can't you just tell me what's going on?! I'm your best friend; you shouldn't be hiding this from me!" Draco snapped, now completely irritated at the silent responses he was receiving.

"I'm not hiding anything..." Harry mumbled softly, his eyes stubborn and indignant as he walked on, not noticing that Draco had stopped walking and was now watching his retreating back.

Just as Harry was about to turn the corner, he stopped, catching sight of Draco standing there, looking at him with a rueful glint in his eye.

"Look... Harry, you don't have to carry on with this... You don't have to prove anything to me anymore. Why don't we just call this stupid bet off and you can stop pursuing Granger... You've made your point. You don't have to force yourself to go through all this bullshit any longer." Draco offered, looking at him reproachfully.

Harry's eyes widened considerably as Draco promptly stuck a hand out for him to accept, giving him a small friendly grin to ease the shock and the disbelief in Harry's face.

Harry stared at the hand for a long moment, briefly debating with himself whether or not he should take it but he kept his resolve, not making any move to take the hand offered to him as he just stared back calmly.

"Thank you for your offer Draco... But you forget... Whether I win or not... I'm Harry Potter... I never give up, quit or back away from a challenge.... I'm taking this like a man... I wouldn't just run away from this that easily." Harry explained, shaking his head though there was a slightly reluctant look on his features.

Draco let his hand drop immediately, his eyes widening and his best friend's refusal but he glared at Harry as though he was daring him to affirm to what he had just said, not wanting to believe his words.

"What exactly do you want to prove by that, Potter?" He demanded quietly, tensing up as he waited for his response.

Harry sighed, shaking his head before turning away and continuing to walk down the street, feeling Draco's sharp, stinging glare burning a hole right through his back.

"It means... That I took this bet... I should be the one to decide how this bet ends... In my case, I have three options to choose from... I can both go forward and try to win... Let myself lose... Or... Cancel the bet altogether... But... Let *me* be the one to make that decision by myself, Draco." Harry said softly but firmly with a hint of determination in his eyes.

"What the bloody hell do you mean by that, Harry?! Dammit, what aren't you telling me?! Would you just tell me how you feel about Granger once and for all?!" Draco insisted, looking at him angrily but Harry only cringed and walked on, avoiding his gaze.

Draco raised an eyebrow as he finally followed Harry around the corner, shoving his hands into his robe pocket and letting his eyes trail thoughtfully on the tracks on the road, *anything* to keep from reacting out loud.

He had barely even noticed that they had already reached the stile at the end of the road where Sirius had told them to meet him, only noticing the big, shaggy black dog when Harry had broken into a weak but warm grin, his eyes lighting up at the sight.

"Hello, Sirius." He greeted, grinning wider when Sirius had trotted over to eagerly sniff the package in Draco's hands before wagging his

tail at them, leading across the scrubby patch of ground that rose up to meet the mountain hovering over the village.

Draco looked up at the tall mountain road in slight reluctance but at the venomous glare from Harry, he sighed and began following the two up as well, wincing every now and then as he caught sight of the mud staining his shoes.

Sirius began leading them to the very foot of the mountain, Harry and Draco were both surprisingly keeping up with him despite his advantage of having two extra paws, the two of them climbing up the steep, snaky path that led to the very foot of the mountain.

Within nearly half an hour, both Harry and Draco were breathing heavily for breath, the two Slytherins now feeling the intense heat of the sun on their pale complexions and sweating slightly under their long Hogwarts robes.

*Even with all our athletic training, there's no way in hell I can survive something like this...* Draco complained inwardly, now running a hand through his hair, wiping the forming beads of sweat on his brow.

"Sirius... How much longer??" Harry whined loudly, running a hand through his slightly sweat-tousled hair, adjusting his disheveled robes and the black sweater that seemed to be clinging onto his lean upper torso.

The shaggy black dog that was Sirius turned around to see the two Slytherins scowling and sweating behind him, giving the both of them what seemed to be an amused smirk before he let out a sharp bark, wagging his tail once again.

"He wags his tail one more time; I'll cut it off..." Draco muttered under his breath as Sirius barked again, baring his teeth momentarily at Draco, who cringed and shook his head, climbing higher up the mountain.

Finally, they seemed to reach what looked like a the entrance to a narrow fissure in a rock at the foot of the mountain where Sirius had disappeared into, leading to a dimly lit cave in which they saw

Hagrid's old Hippogriff, Buckbeak, tied at the end with a rope, his orange eye glinting at the sight of them.

Draco paled immediately and hid behind Harry, giving the amused animal his iciest glare as Harry could only hide a smile as he bowed down slowly to the familiar creature, smiling wider when the beast had bowed back in return.

"Wretched mongrel..." Draco muttered under his breath so that Buckbeak wouldn't hear, causing Harry to glare warningly at him before he rushed forward and gently patted the creature in greeting.

"Still haven't forgiven Buckbeak for that third year incident, Draco?" A voice suddenly asked, causing the two boys to jump in surprise as Sirius grinned at them, now back in his human form, a rolled-up newspaper in his hand.

Draco glowered as he handed Sirius the bag of food they had brought him, shooting cautious glances at Buckbeak every now and then and staying away as far from the animal as possible while avoiding Harry's taunting smirk.

"How could I forget? That animal almost killed me! Personally, I'd want it hanged by now if I could... My father had a fit when he found out it had escaped... Such a dangerous thing like that—"

"Buckbeak only attacked you because you insulted him, Draco. It wouldn't have happened should you have been listening in the first place." Harry pointed out in irritation, rolling his eyes as Draco backed away from Buckbeak again, shifting around in nervousness.

"I don't care, Harry, just keep that thing away from me... That thing has got me traumatized for life!" He declared, shuddering as Buckbeak stared silently at him, as though he was remembering him from their past experience.

Sirius had to laugh at the frightened look on Draco's face, amazed how the look didn't seem to go with the blonde Slytherin at all since he had never seen Draco in such a state as the one he was right now.

Munching hungrily on a chicken leg, he gestured for the two boys to sit down onto the floor, giving Harry a concerned look as he noticed the dark circles under his godson's bleary eyes.

"How have you two been lately? I've been living off rats mostly... I don't want to draw too much attention to myself... But.. Harry, how're you both holding up?" He asked, peering at the two boys closely.

Both Harry and Draco seemed to get the hint that Sirius was referring to none other than AJ's state, trying to see how they were handling the situation as of now. Sighing, they both managed weak smiles in response, causing Sirius to frown at the forcedness of the gesture.

Sighing, he shot Harry a pointed look, knowing full well what exactly was running through the raven-haired Slytherin's mind at that very moment. "Relax, Harry. I'm here fulfilling my responsibility as one of your—I mean, your godfather. Don't worry about me, most people just find me a lovable stray dog." He assured, giving him a reckless grin.

Harry sighed but didn't say anything, shaking his head at the careless tone of his godfather's voice. "Sirius... You *know* it's dangerous for you to be here. What if you're seen or something?" He said slowly, exchanging a look with Draco.

Sirius shrugged again, tossing aside the leftover chicken leg to Buckbeak before grabbing another piece of chicken and working on it just as quickly as the previous one.

"I wanted to make sure you two were doing okay. How's your sister, Harry?" He suddenly asked, momentarily setting down the piece of chicken to glance at his godson as Harry's eyes flickered for a moment, dropping to the floor.

"She's doing okay. Prof. Snape says guarantees the potion wasn't really that strong in the first place...We have to wait for the potion to wear out..." Draco answered slowly for him, shooting a sideward glance towards Harry.

Sirius's eyes flickered as well but it was in fear as he nodded and let his gaze linger away from them into space, a dark look on the older man's handsome though pale features.

"Your letters have been getting fishier Harry... Even the people in the newspaper suspect something is wrong... And I looked up on what you had been writing to me about Crouch... Seems there's something more to him than I thought..." Sirius said slowly, raising the chicken up to his mouth again.

"What do you mean by that, Sirius?" Harry asked, fusing his eyebrows together as Sirius sighed again and took a long swig of water before answering, his face contorted with worry.

"Well.. Let's just say that Crouch has been missing a lot these days... And after what happened to AJ, you should be keeping a sharp look-out for yourself Harry... I don't have any doubts about the fact that they should be after you next. That was the reason I made sure to come here in the first place." Sirius told him, giving him a pointed look.

Draco nodded quietly but Harry's eyes flashed in indignation, not liking the idea of having someone else protecting him other than himself. "I don't need anyone's protection." He muttered stubbornly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Sirius snorted, rolling his eyes at his proud behavior as Draco could only watch as Harry looked up again, his eyes glinting with righteous anger. "I *don't!* I can handle everything fine! You didn't need to come here and risk being seen just for me!" Harry snapped, growling at him.

Draco just sighed and shook his head, reaching forward to grab the article lying by Sirius' lap, ignoring the witty arguments that were now flying back and forth between the two.

*Like Godfather like Godson alright...* He thought in amusement, biting back a smirk as he unfolded the article in mild curiosity but as soon as he caught sight of some of the headlines, his eyes widened in surprise.

*"Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch? Ministry Witch Still Missing—the Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved?"* Draco read aloud to

no one in particular, unknowingly causing Harry to stop arguing and look at him in question as he scanned the article further.

*"Hasn't been seen in public since November... house appears deserted... Ministry refuses to admit critical illness... St. Mungo's refuse comment..."* What's been going on lately?" Draco asked incredulously, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"What the—they're making it sound like he's bloody sick or something... That bastard... He can't be ill if he managed to get here and attack my twin." Harry growled bitterly, his hands closing into fists.

"Father tells me that he hears Crouch is making some lame excuse about being too overworked nowadays... He doesn't tell them personally though... He just sends in owls all the time. I don't get it." Draco told Sirius, shaking his head.

"He *did* look ill though, I'll admit that... But I guess the old man just couldn't survive without his precious little house-elf looking after him after he sacked her." Harry said derisively, snorting in response.

Draco smirked at the memory, remembering exactly how Winky had made it clear that she was *'needed'* by her master to take care of him with not only his health but also his deepest secret.

*I wonder what that stupid thing meant by that phrase...* Draco thought for a long moment, not noticing the annoyed glares his best friend was throwing at him from behind his back.

Just as he was about to point this out however, Sirius had spoken up yet again, breaking Draco's entire train of thought about the secret and Winky.

"Crouch sacked his elf?"

"At the Quidditch world cup this summer. Apparently, she had been accused by Crouch himself for performing that dark mark with my wand that night." Harry explained before launching into the full morbid story, watching as Sirius's eyebrows fused more and more in puzzlement, a calculating look on his handsome features.

"So... You saw Winky saving Crouch a seat before the match itself but he never came to watch?" Sirius asked, his tone of voice incredulous.

"Yeah, I heard he said he had been too busy to watch it... Pretty suspicious if you ask me... Even my father says there's something up." Draco said, raising an eyebrow in thought.

Sirius let out a derisive snort, shaking his head as Draco snapped his head around to glare at him. "I still find it hard to believe that ol' Lucius is working for the light side now... Seems too good to be true... That arrogant bastard..." He drawled, smirking.

"Shut up, *Uncle!* Don't pretend to know about my father! It's not like you actually knew him from school!" Draco blurted out angrily before he could stop himself, causing Sirius' eyes to widen and glare at him in warning while Draco wished he could have taken back his words.

"Uncle?" Harry asked with a lopsided grin, somewhat amused by the situation, much to both Sirius and Draco's silent relief.

"Nothing, I was just kidding. Anyway, that elf scene still seemed rather odd to me...I reckon Winky had been there for another reason." Draco rushed out hurriedly, hastily changing the topic again as Harry had to frown in confusion but Sirius answered just as quickly, drawing his attention from the subject.

"Yeah, I reckon too... Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand when you were leaving the top box?" Sirius asked, watching as Harry's eyes glided away in concentration.

"Er... No, I don't think so... Besides, I didn't *need* my wand before we went into the forest that night... But that was when I found out I didn't have it with me anymore... Hey, wait... Are you implying that it was stolen while we were at the top box?" He asked, his eyes widening.

"I'm not saying anything, Harry, but you have to admit it's possible." Sirius answered calmly, taking another swig from his water again before continuing.



"If only AJ was here right now, I'm sure she would have a lot of information about this... She tends to remember details more accurately than you, Harry." Sirius kidded lightly, feeling a small twinge of triumph when both Draco and Harry had cracked weak grins in agreement.

Sirius thought he sensed a miserable, haunted look in Draco's eyes for a split second before it was gone as fast as it had appeared, Draco looking back up at him in curiosity. *Oh... I get it now... I see...* Sirius thought, allowing a small smile as he saw the slight tingeing of pink in Draco's pale cheeks, shaking his head before he turned back to an irritated Harry.

"There were other people in the top box too right?" Sirius asked inquiringly, frowning to himself.

"Yeah... Lots, there was Cornelius Fudge, some Bulgarian ministers... The Weasleys too I guess along with Finnegan and He—Granger..., Oh yeah, there was Ludo Bagman of course." Harry stated.

Sirius shot up and began pacing around the cave, Draco and Harry's eyes following his every move as he did. "I don't really know much about Bagman... He used to be some famous Quidditch player right? Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps if I'm not mistaken.." He mused, stroking his chin.

Harry rolled his eyes and exchanged amused smirks with Draco at the mention of the annoying ministry member. "I guess so... He's just so bloody annoying though... I swear, he wants me to win so bloody damn much that he even wants to help me out with some of the tasks." He commented casually.

"What a suck-up... Seems he's taken such a liking towards Harry here." Draco added, laughing at the warning glare from Harry.

Sirius didn't look amused however as he glanced at Draco again, raising at eyebrow at his statement. "Does he now? Why the hell would he be taking such a liking towards an ill-mannered, foul-mouthed champion like Harry?" He wondered out loud.

“Hey—” Harry made to protest but Draco’s laughter cut him off, soon followed by another formulated comment.

“Hey! Now that you’ve mentioned it, we met up with my father during that same night and later on, he’s told me that he found Ludo Bagman wandering around in confusion in the woods, unaware of what had been happening.” Draco pointed out in realization.

“Oh come off it, Malfoy! Are you two actually implying that that wimp could have made the dark mark appear in the forest that night? If I wasn’t so annoyed by the stupidity of it all, I’d be laughing my ass off.” Harry snapped in annoyance.

“Still, it’s possible Harry. What if he hadn’t disappeared to the campsite like my father had said? What if he had secretly remained in there or something—”

“Yeah but the mere *fucking* fact that it’s *Ludo Bagman* who may have conjured such a powerful mark is just plain ridiculous!”

“Oh cut it out, you two! Arguing like this is not going to get us anywhere.” Sirius interrupted, sighing as he plopped down to the floor again, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

Harry and Draco both shot each other malicious glares, keeping tensely quiet as Sirius thought on, ignoring the two boys with him for a long period of time.

“...Harry? How exactly did Crouch react when he found his house-elf holding the wand after the dark mark had been conjured?” Sirius asked suddenly, looking very intently as Harry broke his glaring contest with Draco to answer.

“He went to look in the bushes like a total idiot when there wasn’t anyone else there. Probably looking for someone else to pin it on.” Harry muttered, looking uninterested as he spoke.

“But then he sacked his elf?” Sirius asked again, looking incredibly nonplussed as Draco sighed in exasperation.

"Haven't we answered that already? What is it with you and that wretched house-elf, Padfoot?" He asked irritably, rolling his eyes.

"Well, they say if you want to know what a man's like, look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals." Sirius pointed out smugly, smirking when both Harry and Draco shifted uncomfortably, looking anywhere but him.

"However... All of Crouch's absences... Not turning up in the Quidditch World Cup, not turning up in the TriWizard tournament he himself wanted to reinstate... It's not like him to take days off work just because of an illness..." Sirius marveled to himself.

"How do you know Crouch anyway?" Harry asked, momentarily taking off his robe as he spoke to reveal the black sweatshirt and trousers he wore underneath.

"Oh he and I go *way back*..." Sirius said in a deathly slow voice, a dark look on his handsome face. "He was the one who sent me to Azkaban without a proper trial... The bastard..." He growled.

"What?!" Draco and Harry both exclaimed in unison, Draco's eyes widening and Harry's eyes flashing with anger at his godfather's words.

"Didn't you know? That Crouch used to be the head of the Depart of Magical Law Enforcement... Always a strong hater of those who practiced the dark arts so he was never a Voldemort supporter... A power-hungry tyrant, he is... You're both too young to understand anyway." Sirius intoned slowly, a lingering look of disturbance on his face.

"That's what mother and father always tell me! Dammit, would you just tell us?! We're not exactly children you know!" Draco snapped impatiently, glaring at Sirius with rage-filled silver eyes.

Sirius looked at him for a long period of time before he slowly allowed a somewhat dark, sadistic grin to spread across his face, causing a shiver to run down Harry's spine.

"Alright... I'll tell you then... Imagine Voldemort as powerful as he can ever be right now... You don't know who you can trust anymore because it seems more and more people are willing to join his side because of fear... You know that with his kind of power, he can control people so that they do the worst things imaginable without even realizing it... Even those wizards and witches with the most powerful forms of magic... Everyday, you're afraid not only for yourself but for those whom you love... Your family, your friends... you loved one... *everyone*... People dying everywhere... Even muggles. You don't know who's next." Sirius whispered, looking at Harry straight in the eye.

"I'm not afraid of him..." He hissed back clearly, causing both Draco and Sirius to look at him closely to see the evil sadistic gleam in his eye, watching as that gleam seemed to sparkle for a minute before it was gone as soon as it had formed, a calm smile on Harry's face.

"Go on then... What happened?" He asked, the corner of his lips lifted into a malicious smirk as Sirius looked away, surprised at the fear he felt at his own godson's reaction to his words.

"Well, it was then during that time that Crouch made his move... Since he was all out for going against Voldemort's supporters, he started allowing the Aurors to kill rather than capture those caught as followers of Voldemort... And mind you, I wasn't the only one sent to Azkaban without a trial. I would say that Crouch was just as cruel and ruthless as those on the dark side themselves. He even authorized the use of the Unforgivables if needed... However, a lot of people seemed to support him so it had only been a matter of time before he was chosen as the next Minister of Magic." Sirius explained, rubbing his forehead.

"So what happened then?" Draco asked, causing a grim smile to appear on Sirius' face before answering.

"Crouch's own son was caught with some death eaters who were all trying to find Voldemort after his defeat to return him to power... What a nasty shock for him... I guess he wasn't much of a home person." Sirius said wryly, reaching for a loaf of bread.

“Crouch’s own son was caught?” Draco asked in surprise, an eyebrow arched delicately in question.

“Yep... I was in Azkaban when he was brought in. He may have been at the wrong place at the wrong time but I can’t be too sure.” He said, shrugging as he tore off another piece of bread and popped it into his mouth.

“So did Crouch try to get his son off?” Harry asked but Sirius burst out in laughter, shaking his head at the mere innocence of Harry’s question.

“Harry, I thought I already explained Crouch to you! Anything that dared to ruin his reputation had to go! He’s worked all his life for his reputation! His responsibility towards his son only went far enough to give him a trial but that was it. Seems he hated the boy... Sent him straight to Azkaban.” Sirius said grimly, shaking his head.

“So he gave his own son to the dementors?” Harry asked quietly, his face suddenly paling with anger and disgust.

“Yeah... I even saw the dementors bringing the poor boy in... About nineteen or so... He was screaming for his mother by nightfall... But as always... He went quiet after awhile... Just like everyone else did... Except perhaps when he screamed in his sleep...” He muttered darkly, an angry scowl on his face.

“He’s dead now though... And he wasn’t the only one... Most either go mad or die in there within a short period of time. And that boy didn’t exactly look too good when he was brought in... Crouch and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit but that was it. He died shortly afterward and the wife soon followed... Probably out of grief. And Crouch never came for his son’s body... They buried him outside the fortress.” Sirius finished, unknowingly causing a twinge of fear to erupt in Draco’s chest.

“He lost it all after that.... One minute he’s on top of the world, the next, his wife and son dead, family dishonored... Popularity also decreased because of the way he handled his son... Because of this, Cornelius Fudge got the top job and he was shunted towards the department of International Magical Cooperation. Sad morbid story

huh?” Sirius asked wryly, tossing the remaining chicken bones to Buckbeak.

“So that’s why Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching another Dark Wizard... He thinks he can bring back his popularity by proving he can catch another one... That doesn’t explain why he would attack AJ though... Wouldn’t that just ruin him once again?” Draco thought out loud, stroking his chin.

“He was also searching in Snape’s office... You think he has any suspicions about Snape?” Sirius asked no one in particular, looking confused. “No, that’s not it... Otherwise, why would he have stopped coming to the tournament if he wanted a close watch on Snape...” He answered himself hastily, shaking his head.

“You think Prof. Snape has something to do with all this?!” Harry asked in disbelief, not wanting to accept that his favorite and most trusted mentor in Hogwarts could have a hidden agenda in mind.

“I’m not sure... I’ve always found Snape rather odd back at our school days at Hogwarts... The loner of the whole year, that’s for sure... Plus, he never really did talk much as well... Even Draco’s father here didn’t like him even though they were both Slytherins at that time.” Sirius continued, nodding in assurance when he saw the look of surprise on Draco’s face.

“He always seemed to have a world of his own... Thinking to himself... No one really knew what he was like so they were all afraid of getting too close to him.. Who knew what went on in that greasy head of his? Add that to his being associated with dark arts... James and I have always hated him.” Sirius said, smirking as he remembered.

“However, due to... *something* that had happened in seventh year... Snape had changed drastically somewhat and he began hanging out with a group of Slytherins that nearly all had turned out to be Death eaters... Including your father Draco...” Sirius told him sadly.

Draco winced but nodded, knowing the whole story well enough already. His father was a man who was easily driven by his impulses at the time and he had told Draco that joining Voldemort seemed like

the best option to take, considering he was obviously the more powerful side.

However, it was more due to the death of a certain someone that had really caused his father to turn completely hateful and vengeful towards everyone else that he joined Voldemort's league completely, finally following Draco's grandfather's wishes to marry Narcissa, whom his father had never really loved at all in the first place.

He knew his father was not evil... And he was one of the few people who actually did... Even now, he knew that a lot of people in Dumbledore's side still hated Lucius for a reason despite the fact that he had switched sides for good. His reputation still continued to haunt him despite all his efforts to correct his past mistakes.

*I guess a Malfoy will always be associated with evil magic now...* Draco thought bitterly, shaking his head as he thought of the unfair prejudice most of the wizarding world had against their family.

"Rosier and Wilkes—both killed by Aurors, the Lestranges—a married couple in Azkaban, Avery—damn bastard wormed his way out of Azkaban by saying that he had been acting under the Imperius curse so he's still at large... However... Snape's never been accused of being a death eater..." Sirius thought, biting his lip.

"He seems to know Karkaroff pretty well though. I saw Karkaroff showing something on his arm to Snape the night of the Yule Ball but I didn't pay much attention to it.. You think it could mean something?" Harry asked, his forehead wrinkling.

"Karkaroff showed Snape something on his arm?! I don't really know what to say about that... But still... Dumbledore trusts Snape—"

"So do I." Harry interrupted firmly, Draco nodding in affirmation behind him as Sirius sighed in defeat nodding as well.

"Still... I reckon Moody's keeping a close watch on him... He doesn't trust anyone at all... Very uptight, that man... I have a lot of respect for him. Never killed anyone if he could help it... He always brought them in alive. He says he doesn't like the idea of demoting himself to

the level of those death eaters. Crouch though..." He sighed again, feeling weary from his own thoughts.

"What is up with his disappearances lately? It just doesn't seem right.. Say... Harry, didn't you mention in the letter before that Percy Weasley is Crouch's personal assistant?" He asked, his eyes widening.

"Yeah..." Harry answered in confusion, meeting Draco's questioning look with a careless shrug.

"You think you can write to him or something about the Ministry's current condition and if he's seen Crouch lately? Also about any leads to Bertha Jorkins... I think we should start from there." He said, slowly rising up from the floor.

Draco and Harry both snorted in amusement, Draco giving Sirius a lopsided grin in response. "Well... I don't think Weasley would be too keen on giving Harry here much information, Sirius..." He commented casually, smirking.

"Why is that?" Sirius asked, looking back and forth between the two Slytherins in question.

"Well... Let's just say... Harry and his younger brother are not exactly the best of friends... And of course, Harry wasn't really all that *respectful* to him back when he was a Head boy here in Hogwarts." Draco answered, sniggering.

Sirius snorted and rolled his eyes, giving the two sniggering boys his reckless grin in response. "Whatever you two, you just figure something out. Make up some lame excuse why you're suddenly writing to him or something. You'll think of a way." He said, yawning before he stretched out his arms, looking around.

"What time is it?"

"It's about half-past three." Draco answered, checking his watch casually.



"You two had better get back to school then, it's getting late." Sirius told them, nodding as Harry and Draco both rose from the floor, gathering their things.

"Listen Harry, I don't want you and Draco sneaking out anymore like this to see me okay? Just send me notes up here but don't leave Hogwarts unless necessary. I don't want any other attacks... It was a fortunate thing that AJ's attack wasn't something too serious... Lucky you found her in time." He said, nodding.

Harry glowered silently, sighing as he shook his head at his godfather's words, indicating to Draco. "It was Draco who found her... Not me..." He muttered, not seeing the blush on Draco's face and the grin Sirius was giving him.

"Right... Anyway, take care of yourselves okay? I'll be able to breathe again once this tournament thing is over... You best stay out of trouble." Sirius said, giving them a reprimanding look.

Harry snorted, breaking out of his trance to give Sirius a disbelieving look. "Oh and I'm here this from one of the famous, legendary marauders? You surprise me, Sirius... You really do." He kidded weakly, grinning at Sirius' annoyed frown.

"Yeah..." Draco began, shooting another reckless grin at Sirius as well as he and Harry headed for the entrance of the cave, slipping their Hogwarts robes back on themselves.

"Besides, you know us Sirius... Harry and I are always out of trouble... Why do you think we're called the Slytherin duo?" He said, giving an amused Sirius a wink before they walked out, Sirius shaking his head behind them.

*Merlin... I'm shaking all over...* Hermione thought, biting her lip as she glanced at her reflection in the full-length mirror that night, a glowing yet nervously anticipating smile on her face.

Tonight was the night... She wasn't going to back out from this decision anymore... She *wanted* this to happen... And somehow, she knew that she would be mature enough to handle the situation...

*Okay Hermione... It's alright to be nervous... Just try and relax...* She told herself, managing to crack a weak smile at her fidgeting reflection as she inspected herself in the mirror again, checking to make sure she looked alright for their date that night.

After the morning incident, Harry had specifically told her that they would be having a candlelight dinner he had already asked the house-elves to prepare for them that night in the Slytherin pool room where he knew that they could both be ensured of their privacy.

*I can still remember the first time I had been there.* Hermione thought in amusement, giggling nervously under her breath as she remembered the furious flash in Harry's emerald green eyes when she had denied him that night for the first time, leaving him alone in the pool.

How terribly ironic that this particular room was also where she would be giving herself to him for the very first time... It seemed to her that somehow, fate had an annoying sense of humor after all.

*If only I could relax myself...* Hermione thought, scowling as she rubbed her arms gently, trying to calm down the goose bumps running all over them in anticipation. *Well everything's different now... What happened in the past is history... We're different now.* She assured herself, nodding as she caught sight of the small smirk her reflection was giving her at her nervous expression.

"Hot date, dear?" She asked lazily, causing another warm blush to spread up to Hermione's cheek as she answered hastily in response.

"Y-yeah... You could say that..." She mumbled, hesitantly tying a white lace ribbon through her mane of brown hair, remembering how Harry had once told her that her best color was easily pure white which brought out her beautiful innocence.

How the raven-haired Slytherin came to that conclusion, she did not know but she had loved his words... And the way he had spoken them while gazing lovingly into her eyes had caused numerous shivers to run down her spine.

It was amazing how much of an impact Harry seemed to have on her... It seemed that even the slightest smile or touch from him could have made her heart spontaneously combust from her chest but she easily hid it well from him, not wanting him to know the effect he had on her.

However... The thing that puzzled her the most was that now, it seemed as though she was getting to know a whole new side to Harry that she had never even seen before... His sweet, romantic and sensitive side...

Sure, she had gotten several glimpses of it before but it was only now that Harry was letting it show more naturally than before, the Slytherin now giving her smiles and sweet, gentle kisses whenever they were together.

It was like the jerk in Harry she had known from three years ago had ceased to exist... Like he had suddenly disappeared like he was a mere distant memory that had never existed and had only been part of a horrible dream...

It was like Hermione was waking up and seeing the real Harry now... And she was loving every minute of it. Being enemies with Harry seemed so far ago now... In fact, Hermione hardly ever thought about their past anymore... She didn't care anymore... *This* Harry loved *her*... She didn't need to bring back any horrible memories of the person he was before...

Hermione knew that it seemed like she was the only one living in a dream world so far... Harry was exactly the same guy she had known three years ago out in the school corridors...

He was still the child who tripped Hufflepuffs as they passed, bullied his friends into doing his homework, scared off the much younger students in the school and laughed at the expense of others... Nothing has changed... Except...

*Except when he's with me...* She thought, a warm feeling of happiness rushing inside her stomach as she thought of how Harry had been treating her these past couple of days.

Nothing he could even describe the way she felt when she was with him... How those silly little encounters at the beginning of the year had developed into something like this, she couldn't be too sure... It was like those times were far behind them now. A lot has happened since then... No one could have predicted this outcome.

She herself had never expected herself to fall for her former Slytherin enemy... She was positive that if she had dared to go back in time with her time turner and had told herself that within a couple of months, she would be head-over-heels with Harry pretty-boy Potter, then that Hermione would have laughed out loud in her face.

If she thought about it, she and Harry were entirely different people... Much deeper than their being a Gryffindor or Slytherin of course... But how she fell for him was still somehow a mystery. She honestly did not now know why or when she had fallen for him or what she had seen in the jerk.

*Okay, so maybe I 'did' have a crush on him before in second year but that was purely physical... I never found any of his character traits appealing.* She thought, shaking her head to herself in amusement.

But she couldn't do anything about it now... Now, she was way in over her head. She was too involved now and it had become more personal... She *loved* the git... And she could honestly say that she had no regrets over all that had happened.

*What a story to tell the children one day... Once mortal, hateful enemies now turned into dizzy-headed lovers...* She thought, chuckling lightly. Then, her eyes widened in realization when she had processed what she had just been thinking of. *Children?! Whoa!! Slow down, Hermione! Take it one step at a time, you've got plenty of years ahead of you!* She scolded herself, her cheeks blushing once again in embarrassment at herself.

*But now that I've thought about it... What do we call ourselves? Lovers?* She wondered, frowning as she finished tying the ribbon onto her hair in a French braid that ended just above her below her shoulders, the hairstyle exposing more of her delicate facial features.

She didn't really know what to call Harry just yet... Would he appreciate it if she referred to him as her...*boyfriend*? She knew the raven-haired Slytherin well enough now and she knew very well that Harry didn't like girls who scared him off with the concept of the "R" word... Meaning, *relationship* or *steady relationship* to be exact.

She knew how he was... He was the type who wouldn't last a whole month with one girl alone. A *playboy*... Someone who didn't exactly appreciate the idea of being in an actual serious relationship... She wondered how he was going to handle it once she brought that concern of hers up... She didn't want to stay like this forever. She didn't like hiding from everyone.

Sooner or later, they were both going to have to make a choice... Whether or not they were going to bring this out to everyone else in school and until then, Hermione could only hope that Harry would finally adjust himself to the idea of having a serious relationship with her.

If she was to admit it to herself, Harry was her first everything... Her first *crush*, the first boy who had ever asked her out or shown an interest in her, the first boy she had ever kissed, her first heartbreak, her first date and now... After tonight... The first boy whom she had given herself fully to... *Her first love*...

Hermione wasn't like Harry though... She wanted her first to be her last... Regardless if she had been his first at all. To her, it didn't matter how many girls Harry had dated in the past and if she was his first or not... What mattered was if she was going to be his *last*...

This morning however... She had been truly surprised by Harry's reaction after reading the article about them... She had expected Harry to mock her and sneer at her of course but she had never expected him to demand an explanation as to why people were believing it so...

And just how Harry had looked with his emerald-green eyes focused intently on her face, pleading for her to deny what the article had said... It had caused her heart to do painful cartwheels all over her chest...

*He had looked...Hurt...* Hermione thought, a warm smile spreading on her face, causing a flicker of happiness to sparkle in her shining brown eyes.

*He really cares about me now...* She thought happily, feeling a fuzzy feeling in her stomach as she thought of how Harry had first smiled at her that night in the Astronomy tower, the feeling still giving her butterflies up until now.

*But... He definitely has his anger issues...* Hermione thought, shuddering as she recalled the violent anger and rage in his green eyes right before he had punched her that morning, the hate in his eyes scaring her more than the hostile act itself.

That had been the first time Harry had ever punched her... Heck, it had been the first time that Harry had actually hurt her physically and it had scared her... Knowing that his anger had a tendency to make him lose all sense of control scared her.

It scared her to think that he could do such things given the proper situation... Scared her to think that he had the power and capability to overpower her easily like that.

Though he had apologized shortly afterward and Hermione had seen the sincere guilt in his eyes as he did, she knew that he couldn't have stopped himself either way... It just scared her how his temper seemed to flare up so dangerously sometimes...

She knew it was going to be a problem in the future... She knew Harry hadn't been named as one half of the Slytherin duo with a reason... He had a dangerous and violent side. He was a Slytherin after all and though she already loved him, that main aspect of him was what still scared her.

No matter what happened between them, Harry James Potter was still Harry James Potter. If they *did* come out in public and came out as a couple, she knew it wasn't exactly going to be easy knowing that her boyfriend was the leader of the Slytherins, the worst enemy of her best friends, the brother of her rival and one of the biggest bullies in school.

The thought wasn't appealing to her at all... If she had honestly been given a chance, she would *not* have chosen someone like that for a boyfriend. She would have chosen someone she could have been proud of... Someone gentle and someone more like her in terms of the social status in school and in terms of the crowds they hang around with. That way, it would have been an easier relationship altogether.

But no... She chose a guy who was in another world from her altogether... You could easily tell that just by looking at the crowd of people they hang around with... He hung out with some of the most notorious boys and richest purebloods in the school while Hermione hung around with those of simpler status.. Nothing alike at all...

*But despite all this... I love him... He loves me... I can do this...I 'want' to do this...* Hermione thought, nodding in affirmation to herself before giving her reflection one final glance, evaluating the outfit that she had put on.

She had decided to wear something simple yet stylish—A tight-fitting silk button-down blouse and a green and silver pleated skirt she had especially picked out for Harry... Slytherin colors... Something simple yet casual... And yet, something she knew he would like.

Giving her mirror self one last nervous smile, she carefully put her Hogwarts uniform robe over herself, making sure that none of her housemates would be able to recognize her attire too much as she made her way down to the Common Room, surprised to see Ron and Seamus waiting for her by the fireplace.

"Oh...H-hey, what are you two still doing down here?" She asked nervously as Ron and Seamus both gaped at her in surprise, their eyes traveling to her perfectly made up hair to her well-chosen outfit underneath her robes.

"Uhm... Hermione? Were you planning on going somewhere or something?" Ron asked, confused with a hint of suspicion in his eyes as he eyed her outfit in apprehension.

"Yeah... If I didn't know better and I didn't know you well enough, I'd say you were going to meet *Potter*." Seamus added, a scowl forming

on his features as he had referred to the article they had read that morning, still bringing a bad memory into their minds.

It had definitely pissed Hermione off when she had found out that even Ron and Seamus had started questioning her about the article, making wild accusations about her, Harry and Krum and asking her repeatedly if any of it was true.

Hermione didn't exactly lie to them... She just told them that she wouldn't bother answering any of their questions at all if they wanted to believe Rita Skeeter and surprisingly, Ron and Seamus had not bothered her anymore about the subject, reverting back to their old behavior towards her, which she was thankful for.

Though everyone was else was still making rumors about her in the halls and pointing to her every now and then, she was relieved to know that her best friends somehow supported her, even if they had doubted her at first.

Hermione inwardly winced but forced a laugh, shaking her head vigorously and feeling a strong wave of guilt as she saw the relieved smiles on their faces, ashamed that she was hiding something this big from them until now.

*If they only knew... They would kill me... I've been lying to them all this time... I'm dating your worst enemy behind your back.* Hermione thought, biting her lip as Ron lead them out of the common room, a cheery grin on his face.

*I'll tell them after tonight... I promise... I don't want to hide this from them anymore... I've told enough lies thanks to Harry.* Hermione resolved, sighing as she stopped, meeting Ron's confused look.

"Hey, you two go on ahead... I have to do some stuff right now... I won't be having dinner." She said, gulping nervously as Ron's eyes narrowed in confusion, Seamus lifting an eyebrow right over his shoulder.

"You're not eating dinner? Then what are you going to do... Dressed like *that*?" Seamus asked, a sly grin on his face.



Ron's face suddenly darkened, a scowl forming itself on his features. "Hermione, if you're meeting either Potter or Krum or something—"

"Ron, what are you talking about?! You know me! I... I wouldn't do anything like that!" Hermione said although there was a slight tone of uncertainty and reluctance in her voice that made Ron squint at her.

Strangely enough, Ron just peered at her closely, looking very intently into her eyes as though trying to read what was in them while Hermione hastily looked away, suddenly very interested in her shoes.

Just as she knew she was going to get caught, Ron surprisingly sighed, looking incredibly worn out as he ran a hand through his tousled red hair and nodded, causing Seamus to look at him in surprise.

"Fine... Just... Stay out of trouble, Hermione." He warned, nodding at her while Hermione nodded back in response, slowly letting out a breath of air in relief as the two boys walked on without her, leaving her alone in the dark deserted hallway.

As soon as she was sure they had gone, she slowly turned and made her way to the Slytherin dungeons, turning around every now and then to make sure that no one could see her and that no one else was following her there.

*The students are all in the Great Hall anyway.* She remembered, relaxing as she turned a corner and walked further down the dark hallway, wondering silently how the Slytherins ever managed to find their way around her in the darkness.

Her footsteps echoed softly through the empty silence of the halls, giving her a shiver down her spine as she slowly sped her footsteps up, wanting nothing more than to be safe and sound with Harry beside her.

*I never thought I'd see the day when I would feel 'safe' with Harry...* She couldn't help thinking, letting out a half-nervous, half-anxious giggle as she now found herself walking as fast as she could, feeling an eerie chill up her spine.

Someone was following her... She could feel it... The hairs at the back of her neck was rising up all over and it was freaking her out... She felt as though she could feel someone's eyes on her back...

Realizing that she was all alone in a dark, deserted *Slytherin* corridor where no one could see or help her, she felt her heartbeat begin to speed up as she forced her feet to go faster, her eyes wide and her face now pale with fright.

She was just about to break out into a full run when she had turned the last corner when she crashed right into a dark figure in front of her, causing her to fall backward onto the ground at the impact.

She was just about to open her mouth to scream for help when she caught sight of the amused-filled emerald green eyes peering down at her, causing her to let out a breath of relief.

Harry smirked down at her shaking form, raising an eyebrow as he leaned against the wall casually, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why Granger... I would think that being a Gryffindor, you wouldn't be too jumpy all the time." He commented, still smirking.

Hermione glared up at him as she dusted herself off, taking big deep breaths to calm herself down as she recomposed herself. "Would you quit your Gryffindor bravery crap and help me up, Potter?!" She snapped irritably, growling as Harry laughed and walked over to her, shaking his head.

"You're spending way too much time with me..." He marveled, using one hand to easily lift Hermione's lithe body up into his arms, using that same move to pull the slender girl into his warm embrace.

"You're shivering all over. What's wrong?" He whispered into her ear, tucking the stray lock of hair behind her earlobe as Hermione leaned into his arms and visibly relaxed, taking a deep breath.

"Nothing... I... It's nothing." She stammered, biting her lip as Harry frowned at her, arching an elegant eyebrow in response.

“What’s wrong?” He asked again, this time more urgently as he wrapped his arms tighter around her, placing a comforting kiss on her cheek as Hermione sighed, shrugging lightly.

“Nothing... I just felt as if someone had been following me all the way here... I just had the strangest feeling that someone was watching me, that’s all... That’s why I thought you were someone else.” She said, shaking her head.

Harry leaned forward to place a quick kiss on her lips, trying to reassure her with his handsome, lopsided grin. “It was probably just your imagination.” He said, squeezing her against him, pressing their bodies closer together.

“No it was not, Harry... I swear, there really was someone following me... I *felt* it. And the worst part was... Something didn’t feel right about it... Like it wasn’t just another nosy student. Like it was something else.” Hermione said slowly, causing Harry to tense in caution as his eyes immediately roamed around the hallway.

“Fine... Why don’t we head inside the pool house? No one would see us there.” Harry offered, watching as Hermione nodded immediately, obviously relieved with the suggestion.

“Um... Harry... You can let go of me now...You’re kind of crushing me.” Hermione said slowly, giving Harry a timid smile as Harry managed a smirk, not letting her go as he pulled her closer, causing Hermione to turn an interesting shade of red.

“Why? You don’t like this position?” He asked, chuckling when Hermione shifted uncomfortably against him, her lithe body pressed to fit against his own lean frame in contrast.

Grinning, Harry laughed and let her go, grabbing her by the hand and leading her towards the entrance they had used before where Hermione saw the snake once again that indicated the entrance to the pool house.

“*Open...*” Harry hissed in parseltongue, causing another shiver to run down Hermione’s spine but this time not out of fear but of the intensity of Harry’s voice when he had said that.

The chamber opened immediately to reveal the same room they had been in before... Nothing has changed much... In fact, it looked exactly the way Hermione had remembered it from before...

The only difference was that the atmosphere seemed more welcoming and cozier now than before. Although she wasn't quite sure if that was just her or if it was because her feelings towards Harry himself have changed entirely altogether.

"Brings back memories huh?" Harry teased when he saw the calculating look on Hermione's face, closing the entrance silently behind him as Hermione whipped around to face him, a similar grin on her features.

"Yeah. Reminds me of the time I first rejected you." She retorted wryly, laughing when she saw Harry's grin replaced with a scowl, his emerald green eyes narrowing at her in warning.

"Watch your mouth, Granger..." He muttered, walking past her as he lifted his wand and whispered an unknown spell under his breath, instantly causing all the candles in the room to light up, the fireplace roaring to life in front of them.

An uncomfortable silence soon followed after that as Harry turned to see Hermione shifting uneasily on one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace, her gaze focused intently on the large pool in the middle of the room, a blush on her features.

Harry raised a curious eyebrow at her, giving her a questioning look. "Hermione? Are you okay?" He asked her but Hermione only nodded, rising up abruptly from her chair and adjusting her robes, biting her lip every now and then.

"I'm f-fine, Harry. Just thinking how much this place has changed..." She replied hastily, anything to draw his attention away from her blushing face.

Harry finally lifted the corners of his lips into a full-fledged grin, slowly walking forward behind her before he put his hands on around waist, pulling her into his arms.

“Reaaaally? But.. You just agreed that you think this place looks exactly the same as before...” He pointed out, leaning forward to give her a tender kiss on her neck as Hermione blushed intently but didn’t pull away, closing her eyes and enjoying the sensation.

“I—I know—that’s what I meant! I m—mean—I was trying to imply t—that—”

Harry couldn’t help smiling weakly at her stammering before he pulled away again and grabbed her by the hand, giving her a mischievous smile, his eyes twinkling.

“Are you feeling okay?” He asked, checking to see if Hermione had calmed down for her earlier experience but Hermione gave him a smile, nodding slowly in agreement.

“I am *now*.” She answered, smiling back as Harry squeezed her hand in response giving her a wider grin.

Harry nodded, lifting her hand to his lips to give it a gentle kiss before he grinned mischievously again, his emerald green eyes sparkling as he leaned forward to whisper something in her ear.

“Come on... I have something to show you.” He murmured, his lips lightly touching her earlobe before he finally tugged on her hand, leading a confused Hermione across the large room towards a smaller door across from them.

“Harry, where are you going?” She asked, laughing as Harry hissed something in parseltongue to the door once again, causing it to magically slide open and reveal what was on the inside, causing a gasp to escape Hermione’s throat.

If she had thought that the poolroom itself was something, *this* room was just plain *magnificent*... It was beautiful...

Harry watched nervously as Hermione unknowingly dropped his hand and circled around the dimly lit room, an expression of utter awe on her face. The room was not as large as the main room they had been in with the large pool but it was easily just as beautiful.

The room itself was circular and its walls were a deep velvet green lined with patterns of small silver snakes once again in honor of the Slytherin trademarks. In the middle of the room was a beautiful marble fireplace with a roaring bright green fire which illuminated the room while the smell of sweet incense floated in the air, giving the room a more romantic atmosphere.

The floor was lined with a dark green carpeting, much darker than the shade of green on the walls while the ceiling was magically enchanted, just as the Great Hall, to look like the night sky outside the castle, exposing the numerous stars that night.

A large green four-poster bed with silk curtain hangings was situated at the other end of the room right across the fireplace, completely rumple-free and neatly made, causing Hermione to blush darkly at the sight of it but look away, feeling her heart pounding rapidly in her chest.

There was also a small, elegant desk near the bed with a bookshelf beside it, several books neatly arranged inside while a tall, luxurious armchair was positioned facing the fireplace, glowing in the fire's light.

The most incredible thing about the room however, was how a beautiful sparkling mist swirled around the atmosphere, providing just the right touch with several red rose petals included, floating and swirling around the room magically.

"Harry... It's beautiful..." She breathed, her eyes wide and glassy while Harry let out a smile behind her, walking up to her and gently turning her around to draw her attention back to the fireplace to what she had not seen in front of it.

It seemed Harry had taken the liberty of spreading out a fine silk mat over the space in front of the fireplace and over it, was the most expensive and delicious-looking spread of food Hermione had ever seen, topped off with crystalline plates and wine glasses, a bottle of sparkling cider at the very center.

"I thought you'd like to have a picnic candle-light dinner tonight... Well... *sort of* candle light..." Harry said, shrugging while a cute blush

was now evident on the raven-haired boy's features, causing Hermione to smile despite her own blush.

"You did all this?" She asked, her voice shaking a little but Harry didn't seem to notice, too busy staring at his own shoes to care, nodding silently.

He didn't have time to react however as Hermione rushed forward and threw her arms around him, yanking him down into a full passionate kiss, which Harry only seemed eager to respond, wrapping his own arms around the slender girl.

When she had pulled back, she coughed and looked away with wide eyes, surprised at herself for doing such an aggressive act but Harry only smirked pulling her back into his embrace.

"Well then... Let's eat shall we, Ms. Granger?" He asked, winking at her before he let her go and offered his hand to her with his well-practiced heartbreaker smile. Hermione knew better though...

Though she knew that that smile had been overused by Harry so many times before with all those other girls, she knew that the smile she was seeing now was the most gorgeous one of all because this time, he was smiling with *love* and *warmth* in his eyes... Something that can never be seen by anyone else rather than her...

Smiling back, she slipped her hand through his and let him guide her to sit down onto the smooth material of the mat across him, still letting her eyes travel around the room occasionally in admiration.

Harry carefully poured some cider onto the two wine glasses and offered her one, obviously amused by the facial expression on Hermione's face. "You trying to get me drunk or something Potter?" She teased, grinning at him.

Harry snorted and allowed a sneer at her but his eyes let her know that his sneer was not his usual sneer of maliciousness but a mere sneer to tease her, trying hard to hold back his laughter.

"It's only cider, you Gryffindork. You won't get drunk with Cider. For the smartest student in the year, you surprise me." He retorted,

sniggering when Hermione mock glared at him, rolling her eyes in response.

"I was *kidding*, you jerk. Anyway, if I may ask you, Harry, just how many girls have you brought here and how many girls have you tried this candlelight dinner approach on?" She teased him, though she somewhat dreaded the answer, knowing she would get hurt if he did answer her implied question.

*I couldn't have possible been the only one he's brought here... This is probably his whole seduction scenario scheme... And I'll admit, it's a rather good weapon... Wonder if it's always worked before.* She thought sadly but to her surprise, Harry looked up and met her eyes with his own shining green, a glowing love in them that made Hermione's heart jump in her throat.

"What makes you think I've brought any other girl here?" He answered softly, a tender, gentle look on his handsome face.

Hermione blinked, looking at him intently as Harry gave her a grim smile before looking up at the starry ceiling almost dreamily, his eyes looking glazed off.

"This is my own private area... This is where I come to whenever I feel like being alone... No other girl has even been in here except my twin sister and you... It's a very special room to me... My place of solace. I wouldn't dare degrade it by bringing one of those filthy girls in here." He said, shaking his head slowly at the idea.

Hermione couldn't help but look at him in surprise, her eyes wide and disbelieving as Harry allowed a small smile to cross his lips, looking amused at Hermione's reaction.

"What? Did you actually think I would use a room as beautiful as this just for cheap sex?" He pointed out, smirking.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth but no sound came out, becoming successful in making herself look like a total gaping fish but Harry sighed and looked away, biting his lip in thought.



"I don't expect you to understand, but this room is just.... Well... It's something sacred to me. I go here whenever I need to recuperate myself when I don't feel like going to the Astronomy tower. It's my own sacred area. I don't want anyone else to see it or enter it except the most important people in my life or those that really mean something to me... That way, this room would still have its special meaning to me. Its purity would be preserved." He explained, running a hand through his hair.

"But... Never once did you ever bring those girl—"

"Those girls meant nothing more to me than a way to have a good time. A way to have fun. I have never brought any of them here. Heck, I have never even brought any of them to this secret chamber altogether. I bring them up to my dorm in the Slytherin dormitories or sometimes, in empty classrooms, cheap as that might sound. I have never wanted to do anything dirty and disgusting in *this* room. I wanted to keep it clean from the very beginning." Harry told her, shrugging as he took a sip from his cider.

Hermione shook her head, amazed, touched and awed all at the same time at his words, not wanting to believe that she was the first girl he had ever bothered to allow in here except for his twin sister. Somehow, she knew, in his eyes, that he was telling the truth. She felt it in the aura of the room... it was as innocent as she was... And it was comforting somehow... Made her feel much easier around him.

*Some people never cease to amaze me...* She thought fondly as she watched Harry pour himself another glass, a look of concentration etched onto his handsome face. "By the way, have I told you how exquisitely beautiful you look tonight?" He commented, grinning slyly at her

Hermione grinned back easily, a lovely blush rising up to her cheeks as she watched him sip his cider almost enticingly, trying hard to keep her eyes away from those tempting lips.

"I don't think so..." She murmured, smiling as Harry took her hand in his once more, lifting it up to those same lips and giving it a gentle kiss on the back of her palm.

“Well... You look absolutely beautiful...” He said, his eyes sparkling up at her in complete admiration and love as he slowly reached over and cupped her cheek in his hand.

Hermione looked deep into the emerald ocean she found in his eyes, allowing herself to be completely lulled into its beauty, letting go of all her other thoughts as she stared at him.

Harry easily met her gaze for a long period of time, a brief glimmer of guilt and turmoil found within his expression but he blinked and shook it away, shifting uncomfortably and looking away from Hermione’s intense gaze.

Hermione smiled to herself as she watched the usually confident, suave Slytherin fidget around for the first time, completely amused since Harry was usually the calm, relaxed one during their dates.

Seeing him fidget around nervously and avoid her gaze out of embarrassment was a whole new experience for her altogether and she fully intended to enjoy it while she could... After all... It wasn’t everyday a girl got to see this side of him.

“But... Harry...?”

Harry glanced back up and met her gaze, an eyebrow raised in question as Hermione bit her lip and looked away for a split second, blushing but soon glanced back, a nervous smile on her face.

“Why did you bring *me* here?” She asked, her voice shaking slightly in nervousness but Harry only gave her a lopsided grin, shaking his head at her in amusement.

“Hermione, I once thought you were the smartest witch in Hogwarts... Now I know I must have thought wrong. The answer would be pretty obvious by now wouldn’t it?” He answered simply, a smirk on his face.

Hermione scowled at him but shook her head, giving him a look which indicated for him to continue speaking.

“Easy... You’re...You’re *different*...You’re *special*...You’re very special to me. Why *wouldn’t* I bring you here?” He replied flippantly,

shrugging as he began helping himself to some food but Hermione didn't move, watching him with a dazed look.

"Well? Go on, eat up... We have a lot to talk about later." Harry urged, nodding at her before he turned back to his food, completely oblivious to the fact that Hermione had frozen stiff, a surprised, blissful look frozen on her face at his words.

*I'm special... He says I'm special to him... So it's true then... I 'have' changed him... He loves me... I can feel it. He's different now... I've finally become a part of his life... I'm finally a part of his heart.* Hermione thought, her eyes filling with hidden tears.

*My greatest accomplishment to date... I have finally broken through the heart of cold stone of the proud statue that is Harry James Potter...* She realized, now looking up and smiling fondly as she watched Harry eat with a refined elegance in front of her, briefly making her wonder how he had ever learned such manners with the kind of people he grew up with as relatives.

*Guess it's true what they say about those being in the blood...* Hermione thought, thinking of AJ, his parents and the whole clan of Potters before that, her heart pounding as she felt slightly intimidated by the kind of wizard and witches in his bloodline.

And at that time, Malfoy's words finally came back to haunt him, echoing through her mind and piercing right through her gut as she finally pondered on their meaning.

*"...I don't want my best friend to waste his life on something as worthless as you..."*

*The question is... Am I really good enough for him?* She thought, sighing before finally started to eat as well, keeping her eyes trained on her plate.

"So... Let me get this straight... In first year, you and your twin sister met up with you-know-who in front of a Magical Mirror of Erised, in second year, you were in the legendary Chamber of Secrets, and in third year, you find out that the supposed escaped convict from

Azkaban, Sirius Black, is actually your godfather?!" Hermione asked incredulously, her eyes as wide as saucers and her jaw hanging open.

Dinner had long been finished before that, the two spending the time chatting occasionally about what had happened in the past between them and how they had come to recognize each other as enemies for the past three years.

Hermione had burst out laughing at several occasions wherein Harry had recalled some of their more...*hostile* encounters in their younger years which usually ended up with both Harry and Draco sporting very similar hexes on their bodies or faces.

Though they had utterly disliked each other in the past, they had admitted, once and for all, that they had never hated each other... Perhaps it was more of a uncomfortable awkwardness between them rather than hate...

Harry had always found Hermione to be extremely bossy and boring, a true book-centered nerd who did and talked about nothing more than studying, studying, studying while Hermione had found Harry to be a sexist, arrogant jerk.

It had been especially amusing to recall all their past fights and arguments over the past knowing that a lot has actually changed from then on and that they felt much different now...

Hermione had even gone as far as admitting that she had had a long-time secret crush on the handsome, popular Slytherin for four years now but she had just been afraid to show it and had been irritated by his horrible personality and attitude towards women.

There worlds had just been too far apart at that time... It seemed that nothing could have been done to put those two worlds together. Harry himself hung around, even during his younger years, with some of the most popular students in the school while Hermione was more reserved and anti-social, hanging out only with close friends and companions.

But now... As they talked and reminisced about all this, it seemed she was really getting to know the Harry behind the mask... The

Harry she had once met up on the Astronomy tower and at Hogsmeade during their date... The Harry she had fallen in love with... And she loved that feeling more than anything in the world.

"Yup." Harry grinned, breaking through her thoughts as he waved his wand over the empty dishes in front of him, instantly causing them to disappear from the silk mat to provide them with more space.

Hermione didn't pull away as he edged closer to her and took her into his arms, pulling her to rest against his firm chest as he stared deep into the green fire in front of them, a peaceful look on his face.

"And you think you're life is boring?" Hermione asked again, looking at Harry as though he had just admitted to having a crush on Prof. Trelawney, her voice cracking in surprise.

"Yeah..." Harry answered tentatively, raising an eyebrow as Hermione whacked him painfully on the arm in disagreement, an annoyed look in her eyes. "Harry... If you define your life as boring, then what would you call mine?" She demanded pointedly.

"Utterly dull, monotonous and colorless." He answered, earning him another painful whack from the Gryffindor as she laughed, rolling her eyes at the honesty in his voice. "Oh you... I *know* that already, don't rub it in." She told him, shaking her head.

Harry smiled, pulling her closer to him as she snuggled into his familiar warmth, listening to the calming beat of his heart. "I know Hermione, I was only kidding... I only meant that my life was boring... Until I met you..." He told her truthfully as Hermione was instantly glad she had her face buried in his chest, not wanting him to see her intense blush on her face.

They were silent for a moment after that, Hermione hurrying to think of a thing to say in response to his comment as Harry took a deep breath and began stroking her hair, keeping his gaze focused on the fire in front of them.

"So.... What's it like having an escaped convict for a Godfather?" She asked hastily, mentally scolding herself for asking such a question off topic but Harry smiled weakly, a wry look in his eyes.

“It’s not much... AJ and I don’t get to see him much often since he flees from one place to another away from the Ministry. I miss him a lot sometimes... He’s the closest thing to a parent AJ and I have ever had.... And he had to be a convict.” Harry said out loud, sighing.

“Is he...sorry for—”

“No! He’s innocent, ‘Mione... It may seem hard to accept at first but I tell you, I *know* he’s innocent. AJ and I don’t blame him for our parent’s death... It wasn’t him...” Harry explained, the light in his eyes fading for a split second at the mention of his sister again but he hid it well, looking away.

Hermione nodded, not demanding a further explanation as Harry only ran his arms up and down her back, causing the girl to shiver in response at the contact between them.

“Mmm...” Harry murmured, snuggling himself into her neck as Hermione squirmed in response but didn’t pull away, only closing her eyes and sighing as Harry held her silently, content to have him close to her even if no words were spoken.

They stayed that way for a fairly long period of time, listening to each other’s rhythmic breathing and each one enjoying the silence around them. Not a word was spoken as some sort of understanding passed between them... Like somehow, through their actions alone, they had exchanged a whole set of conversations between them within the span of those few moments.

They didn’t need anything else... The whole world faded away from them completely... It had faded away and they had strayed away from the turmoil they now faced in their own separate worlds the minute they had stepped into the room...

They had left that world behind them. What mattered now was them... Just them... Being together like this without the fears, problems and anxieties in their worlds... It was like, for that night alone, just for that single time, they had a chance to soar up to the heavens and live in their own perfect world...

A world where only the two of them existed... No one else... But somehow, they both knew that at some point... They couldn't hide from their worlds forever. They had to fall back into the cruel harshness that was reality and they had to leave their own special world behind. It was only a short span of time before it was time to put their masks on yet again...

"Hermione?" Harry asked, biting his lip nervously as he didn't dare open his eyes, instead, keeping a firm hold on the girl in his arms.

Hermione didn't respond but Harry somehow knew she was listening to him, feeling the emotions radiating off of her aura in some way... Sighing, he pulled her against him before speaking.

"I—I'm sorry about earlier... I... I didn't mean to hurt you like that... I'm.. I'm *sorry*..." He whispered, feeling a surge of guilt rush through his entire body but to his surprise, Hermione only chuckled, snuggling into him comfortingly.

"You do know that ever since that article about us... My housemates have been cornering me lately for confirmations, Ron and Seamus have doubted me a lot these days and your fans have been sending me howlers right?" She asked, an accusing tone in her voice that made the Slytherin wince.

"I know... I know I made another mistake about believing that article but see, I wasn't—"

"Oh, Harry, forget about it! I was only kidding!" Hermione said, laughing as she opened her eyes to see the forlorn look on his face, her features creasing in slight concern.

"Harry? What's wrong? Why do you look so guilty about what happened? Don't worry; I know you didn't mean to punch me like that... *I know you would never hurt me again.*" She said softly, giving him an affectionate smile but to her surprise, Harry had looked away sharply again as though he had been stung, pulling out of her embrace as though she was on fire.

*"I know you would never hurt me again..."* The words began to echo loudly inside his head, mocking him with the innocence and pure

sincerity he found within those few simple words that seemed to pierce like a dagger right through his chest.

How could he tell her? How could he tell her about the bet tonight after she had spoken those words too him so sincerely and lovingly? He didn't want to see those beautiful, joyous features drop down in hurt and pain... He couldn't bear to see those brown eyes fill with anguished tears yet again.

He had already seen her cry too many times before because of him... He didn't think he could handle seeing her cry again... For once, in his entire life, that one simple phrase that Hermione had uttered had made him feel only one thing... *Shame*.

For once, he was actually so ashamed of himself... He actually felt disgusted... Compared to Hermione, he was nothing more than a dirty, conniving, deceitful and disgraceful bastard...

He couldn't understand how she could still trust him until now after everything he's done to her lately... For now, he was actually questioning why he had ever considered himself someone who was worthy of praise and worship... How could he have ever thought that the phrase 'Harry Potter' could have ever been associated with the word "Honorable"?

Hermione had made him feel exactly the way he should feel... Like the *scum* he was... *You're scum Potter.. You're a dirty, cheating, lying, deceitful coward... Just tell her the truth!* A voice screamed inside his head but he ignored it, shaking it away stubbornly.

*If you don't do it know, your fucking guilt will eat you alive, Potter! She says she trusts you... give her a reason to do so! Tell her the truth now!* Harry shut his eyes tightly in desperation, shaking his head repeatedly to make the voice go away.

"Harry?!" Hermione asked in question, looking up as Harry hastily stood up from the mat, running his hands repeatedly over his hair as he struggled to compose himself, a wild, disoriented look in his eyes.

"*Don't* say that! Don't you ever say that!" He shouted angrily at her, his eyes blazing but looking anywhere but her own, his shoulders



shaking as he began breathing very heavily, his eyes roaming wildly around the room.

Hermione also stood up, keeping her eyes trained on his hostile, panicked and lost face, looking so entirely helpless at that time as though he had no idea how to react to her words.

“Harry, what are you talking about?! What’s wrong with you?!” Hermione demanded, watching as Harry turned away sharply again, shutting his eyes tightly as though to hide them from meeting hers.

*Okay... I can do this... I can tell her this, Potter... Be a man...* He told himself, trying to calm the fear and the guilt that was currently raging against each other inside him, causing him to lose it completely.

Taking a deep breath, Harry finally nodded in affirmation and felt a wave of shame and guilt wash over him again but he ignored it, slowly opening his eyes and turning to face her once again.

“Hermione... There’s something—” Harry stopped midsentence, his eyebrows fusing together as he watched Hermione smile gently at him and take something out of her purse that looked strangely familiar.

Now a warm glow on her face, Hermione slowly sat back down and placed the music box Harry had given her for Christmas on the mat beside her, looking up to give Harry a nervous smile.

Silently, she fingered the lion-shaped pendant on her neck and used it to wind the music box slowly; waiting until she had given it a few turns before she finally let it go, the music box magically springing to life with the song they had both grown to love...

*“Whenever sang my songs... On the stage... On my own...”* Despite himself, Harry found himself breaking out into a beautiful smile at the familiar lyrics, his eyes glowing vividly at her.

*“Whenever said my words... Wishing they would be heard... I saw you smiling at me... Was it real or just my fantasy... You’d always be there in the corner... Of this tiny little bar...”* Hermione sang, going along with the song as she slowly took slow tentative steps towards

her Slytherin prince, both scared and nervous at the same time as Harry watched her, an unreadable look on his face.

*“My last night here for you... Same old songs, just once more... My last night here with you... Maybe yes... Maybe no...I kind of liked it your way... How you shyly placed your eyes on me...”* She sang softly, almost in a soft whisper as she reached him, reaching out a hand to stroke his cheek, looking deep into his soft, love-filled eyes.

Harry closed his eyes and savored the sweet, tender action, reaching a hand to place it over hers and guiding it to his lips, giving it a warm, soft kiss as he pulled her close, singing the last line of the song for her in a faint whisper.

*“Oh did you ever know? That I had mine... On you...”* He murmured softly before he finally took her into his arms, wrapping his arms around her slender waist as she wrapped hers around his neck, pulling each other close as they danced slowly to the beautiful melody of the song.

Again, neither one dared to speak at all, both listening to the song as images of the Yule Ball began flashing through Hermione's mind, reminding her exactly how safe and secure she felt whenever she was in Harry's arms and how much being with him seemed to make all her pain go away, even if it was he himself who had caused the pain.

It was almost as if that very scene before had repeated itself once again... And they were back in that parallel universe in which only they existed... The song had transported them back through those barriers of time and had brought them back to that fateful day... It had brought back the same wonderful feeling of being able to dance in each other's warm embrace, enveloped by the love being reflected off the other.

*“So let me come to you... Close as I wanna be... Close enough for me... To feel your heart, beating fast... And stay there as I whisper... How I loved your peaceful eyes on me... Oh did you ever know... That I had mine... On you...”*

“Hermione... There’s something... There’s something I have to tell you...You should know that—” Harry said hesitantly, trying to speak out but Hermione looked up and placed a finger against his lips, shaking her head.

“Shh... You don’t have to tell me anything, Harry...” She assured him, squeezing his hand but Harry shook his head frantically, trying to pull away from her but Hermione wouldn’t let him, looking up to meet his troubled eyes.

*“Darling, so share with me... Your love if you have enough... Your tears you're holding back... Or pain if that's what it is... How can I let you know... I'm more than the dress and the voice... Just reach for me then.. You will know that you are not dreaming...”*

“But Hermione, please! You have to understand that—”

“Harry, I don’t want any explanations about anything... Please... For once...Even just for tonight.. Let’s not think about what other people might say. Let’s not think about others, let’s not think about our friends... Our problems... Or anything else... Just let it all slip away... Let it go. Let’s just enjoy what we have right now... I don’t want to think about anything else.” Hermione whispered, kissing him softly as Harry kissed back, though reluctantly, not understanding her words.

“Hermione—”

“Harry... Please... For me? Let’s just let this feeling last... Let’s not think about tomorrow... Or the day after that... Or the day after that... All that matters right now is *this... Us...*Please Harry? I want this night to be special for you... For the two of us...” Hermione finally said, her eyes shining in an unreadable emotion Harry couldn’t quite understand.

But Hermione looking at him like that... He sighed as she buried her head deeper into his chest, hiding her face but she felt that Harry had agreed though he had not spoken out loud, somehow sensing it in the way he held her against him.

*“Darling so there you are... With that look on your face... As if you’re never hurt... As if you’re never down... Shall I be the one for you...”*

*Who pinches you softly but sure... If frown is shown then... I will know that you are no dreamer..."*

As the song moved on to the ending beats, Harry finally released Hermione to look deep into her eyes, surprised when he saw a brief flash of something there that he had not been expecting... *Unease...* She was uncertain about something... He just didn't know what it was...She actually looked...*scared...scared but prepared at the same time...*

"Hermione?" He asked, causing her eyes to start, as though she had just been broken out of her trance, and Hermione to smile at him, though nervously, not bothering to answer his question as she pulled him close again, startling him.

"Hermione? Is there something you want to tell me?" Harry asked again, stroking her hair as she leaned her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes and snuggling into his neck.

"Nothing Harry... I... I love you..." She whispered, sighing as Harry squeezed her in response, his eyes moving from her form in his arms to the flickering flames of the fire in the fireplace, anything to avoid her gaze.

"I... I *know*..."

Hermione laughed weakly though it was as if she felt a sharp pang at her heart from those two uttered words, having expected something else from Harry but she laughed it off, not wanting to spoil the moment.

Harry closed his eyes tightly, an expression of pure anguish on his handsome face as he held her in his arms, glad that Hermione couldn't see him for fear of her finding out the truth. "Hermione... There's something you have to know about me... I... Well... This whole...*thing*...It started out as a—"

Harry never got to finish his words as Hermione pulled out of his embrace and pressed her lips firmly against his, causing the Slytherin's eyes to widen in surprise but he soon found himself

responding eagerly, one hand wrapping around her waist and the other going to cup her cheek.

Instantly, he felt his whole body begin to respond automatically to the instinct it normally did, acting more on impulse than his own will as he used his arm to press their bodies closer for contact, every inch of his skin tingling in the sensation.

He held back a gasp at the stir of feelings it caused within him...Every single pore of his body was calling out for contact with Hermione's and he found that he had lost whatever phrase he was going to say, giving in to his body's desires and kissing back heatedly with equal passion.

Hermione let her hand trail up his back and entangle themselves into his hair while her other hand pulled his face closer by his neck to deepen the kiss, both sending bolts of electricity throughout their entire body.

Harry let his other hand trail down her waist, feeling it tremble out of his control... He had no idea it was possible to feel this way from one kiss alone... It seemed as though so many different wonderful emotions was racing through his entire body and he felt as though he could not bring himself to pull away, losing himself completely.

He knew now that he had never and *will* never feel this way about any other girl at all except Hermione... Like it or not, he *did* love her now and no matter how much he tried to tell his heart that it wasn't right to... He didn't care anymore. He didn't care about anything else... If only he would be guaranteed this feeling... He would have this feeling with him for the rest of his life...

Her lips caressing his... Her warm, lithe body pressed so perfectly against his own... He didn't ever think that he could feel this content with just a pure innocent act such as this... Though this was nothing more than an innocent kiss between them, Harry felt as though it held more meaning... more life and more passion than any of the other experiences he had had with other girls...

*Hermione...* He thought sadly as Hermione pulled away for a brief second for oxygen but soon caught his lips again, a smile on formed

on her own lips as she kissed him again as though she was entrusting her entire soul, trust and love into him within that very kiss alone and Harry felt it running through his spine.

He felt a searing pain cut right through his gut... Harry knew what he had to do... He had to tell her the truth... Regardless whether or not she forgave him or not... He couldn't think about himself again like last time...No, that had caused everyone too much pain already... If he really loved Hermione, he had to think about *her* happiness... He had to tell her the truth.

*She...She might never forgive me again... She might not want anything else to do with me.* Harry thought as he felt Hermione weaken in his arms, her rushed kiss slowing down to a tender caress as Harry responded once more, trying to ignore the searing emotions in his chest.

No... He'd have to take that chance... And if she did hate him even more... Then he would have to accept it... otherwise, he couldn't live on like this, knowing that he had Hermione's sincere trust in his hands yet his hands were so dirty that he didn't deserve it... He had to wash it away first... Somehow...

Harry broke his own train of thought when Hermione pulled away from him slowly, letting her eyes flutter open slowly to reveal beautiful, shiny brown orbs filled with a variety of emotions Harry had never seen in them before...*love, trust, fear, adoration and...desire...*

She leaned over to whisper something in his ear, letting her lips brush accidentally over his earlobe as she spoke in a faint, almost shy whisper. "Harry..."

Harry squelched back the roaring wave of lust that hit him right then and there, clenching shaky, clammy hands into a tight fist as he made to turn away but Hermione turned his face to meet hers again, giving him a small, nervous smile.

"Hermione...Don't...You don't want to do this..." He rasped out but Hermione slowly leaned forward and brushed her lips against his again, unknowingly teasing him immensely at the friction it caused

between them as Harry himself pulled away, his eyes avoiding hers in shame.

Every inch of body was telling him to take the opportunity but he kept his firm resolve, extending every bit of will power he had left to pull away, barely able to hold on any longer to his determination.

Hermione blinked, hurt and taken back at his action as she looked at him softly, biting her lip as she took one step toward him again but Harry backed away hurriedly, keeping his frantic, desperate eyes trained on the floor.

“Harry... Harry, please, look at me!” She demanded, her eyes flashing in hurt again as she used her hand to turn his face towards hers again, forcing her to meet her gaze and the sight she saw in his eyes was enough for her heart to jump painfully into her throat.

There it was... Clearly visible in those emeralds... *Desire...Desire and Want...*The desire she found in those eyes was so strong that she felt it easily, radiating off his form but one thing was racking through her brain...*He’s trying to hold it off...He’s trying to control it...* She thought in confusion, looking at him.

Why was he holding it back now that she actually *wanted* him to make love to her? There was so much piercing desire in his eyes but yet his gaze was of ice stone, looking at her with an expression of neutral blankness which reflected nothing of the pain he was feeling at that moment.

As she looked at him, she finally saw a small flicker of weakness and utter, helpless desperation appear in those emerald orbs and it was enough for her to call out her final words, merely hoping that he would listen to them at all...

She didn’t know what was wrong with him, but she didn’t want to know either. As she said, all that mattered was tonight... And she wasn’t ever going to let his opportunity... This chance... This moment... This *feeling* slip away from her now...

“Harry, *please...*Make love to me...*please...*” She whispered pleadingly at him, looking up at his slowly breaking mask of control,

watching as it finally broke and a fire of lust broke out within him, his face contorting in frustration as his own weakness.

Hermione gasped as Harry finally let out a frustrated growl and pulled her towards him, wrapping an arm around her waist as he used the other to wrap around her neck, pulling her face up to look right at his.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for, Granger...” Was all he whispered before he claimed those tempting lips once more, this time, taking full control of the moment now as he finally took the dominant role and initiatives, his hands beginning to roam throughout her entire body.

Hermione was startled by the sudden return of his aggressive nature since she had been the one kissing him before but soon found herself giving in and responding to every act of passion willingly, her heart swelling with love and joy for this boy who used to mock her as she was a kid.

*Those times have changed now...* She thought, allowing Harry to push her back slowly towards the bed without breaking contact with his lips, each one too preoccupied with the other to notice where they’re going.

Hermione felt her heart beating painfully and rapidly now as her mind screamed for her to stop the Slytherin before they went to far but she found that she didn’t want to anymore, not caring if this is wrong or right at all...

It scared her to think that she was so willing to give her innocence to him at this point but she had her reasons... She wanted to experience his love for her... And she wanted him to experience and realize her love for him... She had already decided this... No one... Not even herself... Could change her mind...

Harry broke the kiss for a minute, giving her a intense look as he gently pushed her onto the bed, both unaware that the fire had dimmed to an even more seductive glow, reflecting the aura of love they had released in the room onto the walls...



Hermione felt another twinge of nervousness, not sure and unaware of what she was supposed to do anymore but Harry seemed to be completely sure of what he was doing, having had so many other experiences in the past.

“Relax... Let me handle everything...” He whispered into her ear, his voice husky as he kissed her again, following her down as Hermione slowly leaned back to lie down on the bed, pulling Harry down with her until he was lying on top of her form, pressing against her body.

Hermione felt uncertain once more... She felt so inexperienced... Compared to the other girls Harry must have been with in the past, she must look like a complete amateur but Harry didn't seem to mind at all, knowing exactly what he was doing as he took the full control, handling her as if she was made of pure porcelain.

He broke the kiss for air, letting his lips move onto caress the sweet skin of her pale creamy neck, trailing a long line of sweet, tender kisses down as Hermione closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his lips on her skin, enthralled at how it seemed to cause a warm fuzzy feeling to well up inside her.

She held back a light nervous giggle as she felt Harry nip playfully at her neck, a small, tender smile on his face before he pulled away and looked at her, his face barely an inch away from hers, his body still pressed on top of hers.

Hermione looked up at him with big, trusting brown eyes, knowing that he wouldn't do anything to hurt her or force her to do anything against her will. Harry only leaned down to kiss her lips again, answering her gaze by the way he poured out his own emotions into the affectionate action.

When he had pulled away, Hermione took a deep shaky breath but pushed him gently away, giving him a look to indicate what she was going to do. Harry got off her form but watched, almost dreadfully, as Hermione sat up slowly on the bed, her eyes never leaving his face.

With wide, innocent brown eyes, she slowly began undoing the buttons on her blouse, keeping her face trained on Harry's own

disbelieving ones, not wanting to believe that this was actually going to happen and that she was actually so willing to do this.

Harry took a shaky breath of air as Hermione finally undid the last button, sliding the pure white cloth over her creamy shoulders to fall down onto the bed, blushing intently under Harry's gaze as his eyes traveled hungrily over her form.

Biting her lip, she slowly moved towards him, not daring to blink at all before she reached shaky, unsure hands to Harry's own shirt, blushing even darker as she slowly undid the buttons one by one, trying to keep up with his intense gaze at her form.

When she had finished, she slipped her hands under his shirt and slowly began sliding off the material off him, taking in a deep breath when she caught sight of Harry's lean, firm frame and chest once again.

As she moved her hands slowly down his chest, Harry had hissed in desire once more, his eyes clenching shut as he tried to keep himself from giving in too fast but as Hermione's hands traveled to his trousers, his eyes popped open and he placed his own over them immediately, stopping them before they did anything else.

Hermione flinched in surprise, looking at him in question but Harry only pushed her hands away, not wanting to say anything else.

Still unsure of what she was supposed to do; Hermione's hands traveled reluctantly to the clasp of her bra behind her but the action had been enough to startle Harry back to his senses, an expression of shock and realization etching onto his features.

On impulse, he reached out and grasped her hands firmly in his, stopping her as Hermione looked nervously at him again, her eyebrows fused together.

"Harry—"

"*Stop* it, Hermione... I...We... We can't do this.../ can't do this..." Was all he managed to say before he broke his gaze away from her

and stood up from the bed immediately, grabbing his shirt and starting to button it back, avoiding her eyes.

Hermione felt her cheeks flush red in hurt and embarrassment as she slowly reached over and did the same, shamefully buttoning her blouse back up but keeping a look on Harry as she watched him sit back down on the bed, his back toward her, burying his head in his hands.

They stayed that way for a long period of time, Harry keeping his face buried shamefully into his hands and Hermione staring at him in hurt, confusion, question and anger all at the same time, wanting to know what was going on inside his complicated, stubborn mind.

Within a couple more moments, Harry finally sighed and the action was enough to make Hermione lose it altogether as she moved towards him, keeping her face straight and unwavering.

"It's me isn't it? You don't want me...You don't want to make love to an innocent, inexperienced virgin like me... You don't think I'm worthy." She accused flatly, her voice cold and angry as she looked at him, holding back her angry tears.

Harry flinched at her words but didn't say anything, his shoulders slumping and his form slouching even lower as she said it.

"Please...Don't make me do this..." He whispered, his voice barely audible but Hermione had easily caught every single word, causing her anger to flare up even more, her womanly pride getting the better of her.

"Make you do *what*, Harry?! I thought this is what you wanted to happen... I thought you would *want* this to happen... I thought you'd want to make love to me." She answered quietly, her voice cracking.

"I...did... I mean...I *do*... But...Not like this... Not under circumstances wherein—"

"What circumstances?! What don't you understand?! I love you, Harry! I'm willing to give myself up for you... And now you shun me

away?! You have any idea how much that hurts?" She demanded angrily, the tears now falling uncontrollably down her cheeks.

"It's not that... Hermione, I *have* to push you away. If you only knew—"

"Knew what, Harry?! What now? That you have another girl? Or that you fancy someone else already? Or maybe you don't love me...Just tell me now, Harry! Tell me now before I cry over something you did that isn't worth crying about!" She screamed at him, now crying and shaking as she spoke.

Harry winced again at the tone of her voice but he didn't respond, only burying his face deeper into his hands as Hermione cried softly into her own hands, her shoulders trembling.

"Hermione... You don't want to do this with me... I... I don't want to hurt you..." Harry managed weakly, shaking his head in his hands but Hermione was unrelenting but her voice seemed to calm down as she managed to pull herself together to say something else.

"I trust you Harry... As much as you said you believed in me... Remember? Please... Let me put trust in you the same way you believe in me..." Hermione pleaded again softly but Harry stiffened, his fists tightening.

"Well *don't!* *Don't* you trust me, don't you *ever* trust me, dammit!"

Hermione collapsed at his words, her cries and sobs echoing throughout the silence of the room as the green fire had glowed back to life again. It was as though it had sensed the loss of the aura and had now begun to glow to reflect the current emotions of pain running through both.

Then, more out of desperation than anything else, Hermione finally moved toward him and forced him to face her, forcefully removing his hands from hiding his face.

"Tell me, then! Don't you want this to happen anymore? Harry?! Tell me right now, tell me the truth! Do you really love me at all?" She asked desperately, her eyes wide and teary but she stopped when

she saw the expression on Harry's face that he had been hiding from her.

He was...*crying*... He was crying as well... There were continuous tears running down his cheeks and his eyes were glassy enough to reflect the warm glows of the fire in the room, causing a shimmer of hope to rise through her chest.

"Harry—"

"No, that's just it, Hermione!! Don't you understand?! Can't you ever *fucking* understand?! I *do* love you! Love you so much it hurts! That's why I cannot possibly do this! I can *not* hurt you again! I love you too much to do this! I'm sorry!!" He exploded, bolting up from the bed at her touch.

"Harry, tell me—"

"NO! I won't listen! Just stay the hell away! I might not be able to control myself if you don't! I *can't* hurt you again!" He yelled at her wildly before he finally tore out of the room, slamming the door violently behind him and leaving Hermione alone, staring after him in shock, a stream of tears now pouring down her face.

As she kept her eyes lingering on the door, only a single thought had come across her mind as the fire now blazed brighter than ever, somehow symbolizing the pain she felt at that very moment.

"You just did..."

Harry collapsed onto the armchair outside, breathing very heavily and his eyes unfocused, trying hard to regain some thought and some control into himself as he stared into the fireplace.

Though he had fled from Hermione in the room, he couldn't bring himself to just leave... He wanted to stay, yet he knew that until he had told her everything about the bet, he did have any right to be in the same room as her...

Even from where he was, he could somehow see and hear right through the very walls and see the image of Hermione curled up on

the bed, crying softly because of him once again... How much more could he do this? How much more could he continue to do this to her? When would he ever learn...?

“Get it together you Hufflepuff...” He muttered angrily to himself, sneering maliciously at the image of himself he somehow saw in the blazing flames in front of him.

*Get it together...*

**A/N I LOVE YOU ALL! YOU ALL MEAN SO MUCH, I WOULDN'T HAVE DONE ALL THIS WITHOUT YOUR SUPPORT!** Also, if you guys want to talk, rant or ask questions, don't hesitate to email me! Just make sure the topic is “Alternate Adventure” and you can be sure I'll answer you. **THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO PUT ME ON THEIR FAVS LIST! YOU GUYS ROCK!! PLEASE REVIEW!! REVIEW! REVIEW! REVIEW!** Your reviews all mean a lot to me, EVERY SINGLE ONE! Hehe. (Except for flames. smirk Mostly I just laugh at those.) Hope you liked the chapters! Love ya! Ciao!

## Chapter 27- My Sweet Surrender

“Lucius...”

Lucius Malfoy tried not to wince in fear as he forced his feet to move forward towards the hissing shadow in front of him, keeping his eyes devoid of any emotion he knew the shadow could have easily interpreted as something else.

“My lord...” He addressed, bowing down in front of the shadow in a gesture of respect as he felt a strong stab of utter loathing and contempt for the man that stood before him. *If a man is what you would actually call him...*

He felt a growing cold shudder rise out of him as he slowly looked up and met the evil glare of the hideous half-man, half-snake in front of him, biting down on his tongue to keep himself from gasping out loud.

No words could have described what he saw in front of him... What had once been the proud, powerful wizard known as Lord Voldemort had disintegrated into nothing more than a horrifying common parasite.

His form had now assumed the shape of that of a mere child... An *infant*, perhaps but that was where the resemblance itself ended. It had dry, rough snake scales instead of actual human flesh and the infant's eyes burned bright red even in the darkness.

Lucius couldn't stop himself... He shivered as Voldemort hissed dangerously at him, a thin snake-like tongue escaping from its tiny, scaly mouth. “Tell me... How has my faithful servant succeeded in carrying out his assigned task?” He hissed again, looking at him as Lucius tried his best to look subtle when he answered.

“He has...*somewhat* succeeded, my lord...” He began hesitantly, but he didn't get to finish when Voldemort let out another violent hiss and sent out a powerful surge of magic towards the blonde-haired man, sending him flying across the dark cemetery.

"I only ask for a simple answer, Lucius! Has he failed or has he succeeded?!" Voldemort retched at him, snarling as Lucius crashed viciously into one of the headstones, biting back a cry of pain.

Shutting his eyes momentarily to recover from the attack, he opened them again almost instantly and managed to force out a faint response as he painfully willed himself to stand up. "*N-no*, my lord... I-I'm afraid, the boy was not able to kill her..."

"*What?!*"

"He has used the wrong potion, my lord... It wasn't the killing potion but the draught of endless sleep, AJ Potter is now in a deep state of coma." He answered, remembering the haunted, dead tone in his son's voice when he had told him.

Draco did not know it, but he had known all along the plan the dark lord had in killing the Potter twins through the aid of his secret accomplice that year...

His plan was to kill them one at a time, when the other was alone or was away from other's watchful eye... Harry and AJ, when together, could have been untouchable... But apart, they were as vulnerable as they were ten years ago... When Voldemort had first given them their scars...

That is... They were to remain vulnerable until... Until the *right* time came... Only Lucius couldn't be too sure anymore if that was something Dumbledore would risk happening, especially to his precious students.

What Draco also did not know was that it had been Lucius who had exchanged the bottles of the killing potion and the draught of endless sleep when he had gone to '*visit*' Snape to make sure that AJ wasn't hurt.

He hadn't told Dumbledore about it... He had to make sure that though he was working for their side now, he couldn't afford for the dark lord to have any suspicions about his loyalty.



“He hasn’t killed her?! And the boy?! What of that pesky boy?” Voldemort demanded, glaring at him as Lucius shook his head, careful to keep his eyes trained on the floor in a manner of respectful humility.

“He hasn’t managed to do anything to the boy yet, my lord... Although, he informs me that all will be accomplished by the third TriWizard tournament task... You shall have their blood... And after that, *both* Potters shall be destroyed...” He says, hoping that Voldemort did not detect that faint note of scorn hidden behind his voice.

Voldemort’s eyes seemed to flicker in the darkness for a moment, looking steadily as Lucius slowly stood up, keeping his eyes on the ground. “Does he? And I assume you are already preparing to help him by any means necessary?” He asked, watching him carefully.

Lucius only bowed his head even more in response and the gesture seemed to have worked as Voldemort finally allowed an ugly smile to creep across his scaly features, moving one tiny limb to stroke the giant hissing snake that sat beside him.

“If I may ask...My lord... Why the need for their blood?” He asked timidly, his middle-aged silver eyes looking sharply at him just as Voldemort let out a horrifying cackle, his eyes gleaming in a strange kind of pleasure as he answered.

“I’m afraid, Lucius, that they are the only ones with the blood to restore me to my proper proud form... The wretched mongrels... The only one of the same...” His voice trailed off and his face gave an indication that he had no intention of continuing at all, leaving Lucius hanging at his words.

“Same...My lord?” He asked, hoping to get some information to tell the Order but it seems Voldemort wasn’t going to answer, turning to face the snake and reaching one small infant arm out to stroke the giant snake again, hissing something in parseltongue to the said creature.

As he did so, he couldn’t help but catch a glimpse of something etched onto Voldemort’s scaly skin just behind his shoulder but

before he could see anymore, Voldemort had finally leaned back and glanced at him suspiciously.

Lucius felt a tremor of fear bubble up inside him as he watched his master's eyes narrow slowly at him, the thin dry lips rising to form a sadistic smile once more.

"This information, you should have told me sooner, Lucius... I expect better service in the future from my right hand man..." He drawled, still stroking the snake as he talked.

Lucius nodded silently, looking at the ground before Voldemort spoke up again, this time, his voice a sadistic tone that made Lucius stiffen in suspicion.

"And with regards to those pesky children... There's always no harm done in trying a second time..." He continued slowly, laughing.

At the malicious gleam in his eye, Lucius couldn't help but feel the hair on the back of his neck rise slowly, a cold feeling of fear rising over him. "Wh-What do you mean, my lord? Are you saying you are going to have...your servant try again?"

Voldemort laughed again, the horrible sound enough to make the nearby birds in the dead trees around them flutter away in fear, much of Lucius' longing to join them in their fleeing.

"Not exactly Lucius... But as long as my servant resides in Hogwarts, neither Harry *nor* his sister is safe from the clutches of death..." He said and as though he shared some sick meaning of a joke behind his words, he began laughing maniacally, unable to stop.

The older Malfoy stood silent for a moment, waiting until the creature stopped cackling before attempting to do or say anything else. Voldemort finally reached for his wand, the dangerously gleaming weapon looking somewhat strange in the hands of someone or *something* that looked very much like a small ugly child.

"I expect, of course, Lucius...That your loyalty *never* wavers... I don't want to see you fooling around behind my back Malfoy... Because

believe me, I'll know... *Lord Voldemort always knows...*" He hissed, his tongue coming out of his cracked lips like that of a lizard's.

Lucius felt a chill down his spine and instantly moved, panicked as he hurriedly knelt down onto the floor, bowing his head down as he spoke. "O-of course, my lord, of course. I apologize, I—I—"

"Oh, and Lucius?" Voldemort barely blinked as the small, ugly child-like monster looked down at Lucius, a strange glint in his ruby-red eyes. Looking up slowly, Lucius once again, caught the imprinted symbol on Voldemort's skin, making his eyes widen in question.

*A snake... A serpent around a sword...* He thought, shuddering as he finally met Voldemort's eyes, who were now looking at him in what looked like malicious amusement.

"Y-yes my lord?"

"....*Crucio!*"

Draco jolted awake with a sudden gasp of pain, looking around wildly in confusion for a split second before he relaxed, recognizing the white, containing walls of the hospital wing. *What am I doing here?* He wondered absently, running a hand through a mane of tousled, ungelled blonde hair as he yawned loudly to himself.

He glanced sleepily around the dark room of the hospital ward, looking around for something to trigger his memory when it finally dawned on him... Last night... He had told his housemates off without him... He remembered staying in the hospital wing so he could take care of AJ... Then, blushing, he recalled how sometime later, when Madam Pomfrey had left, he had slipped into the same hospital bed as hers, snuggling up to her cold, unconscious form, putting his arms around hers and sleeping with her in his embrace... Somehow, he must have dozed off somewhere during the night in his position...

AJ... He thought again, finally remembering to look at her motionless figure beside him, her skin so pale it was almost glowing in the darkness of the room. Sighing, he gently stroked her cheek, feeling a

bitter disappointment well up inside him at the thought of her current condition.

Slowly, he slipped his hand into her own cold, clammy one, giving the weak, lifeless limb a gentle squeeze but yet again, it was unacknowledged, causing Draco's heart to clench painfully instead as he turned away from the sight, willing himself not to tear up in frustration.

He didn't know what else to do... He didn't know what else the potion would have expected him to do to make himself known to her. Maybe he hadn't told Harry about it but somehow... He had the strangest yet strongest feeling that AJ had been thinking of *him* before she had fallen into a deep state of sleep... It was a powerful gut feeling that grew stronger whenever he was around her.

But lately, it seemed Draco had been trying nearly everything possible just to wake her up... All of which, have availed to absolutely nothing. All he managed to get out of her were occasional but weak hand squeezes and even then, it seemed to do nothing more than to satisfy him.

However...Now... He was beginning to doubt whether his gut instinct had been right after all... Maybe AJ *hadn't* thought of him... Maybe she had thought of Harry or Blaise or even...*Weasley* last and the mere thought of the latter had sent Draco into complete hysterics.

If he had anything to do with it, Ronald Weasley would never get the chance to even enter the hospital wing again as long as AJ was still in there and he had been doing whatever it took to keep the redheaded Gryffindor away from the beautiful Slytherin.

Thinking that Weasley could have been the last person AJ might have thought of was enough to drive him over the edge and he would *not* stand around to witness such a scene as that one... Although... If all else failed and he really couldn't do anything to wake her up... Then...

Draco sighed again and turned to look at her face once more, not removing the hand from her soft cheek as he studied her delicate features with an affectionate look on his face. Oh how he so wanted

to tell her... One of the main reasons why he had been stubborn enough to stay here despite all the protests of his housemates *and* Madam Pomfrey was because... He wanted to be sure that he was one of the few people whom AJ first saw when she woke up. He wanted to be there when those eyelids lifted and revealed those beautiful emerald orbs he missed so much.

How he ached to tell her, firsthand, the minute she opened those bright green eyes... that... *that he loved her*. He didn't care about Weasley anymore... Maybe *he* had been wrong in giving up so fast. *If you love someone... Let them go.... That's just crap!* Draco thought angrily, his eyes flashing in frustration.

He should have never let her go in the first place... It wasn't like him at all... If he loved her, he would *fight* for her...He wouldn't give her up that easily... He would do anything he could to make sure that he won her... That was what he should have realized all along.

*Why the hell did I ever think I should give her to Weasley?!* He thought, disgusted and ashamed at his own stupidity. He knew very well that Weasley could have never given AJ the kind of love and protection she needed... He wasn't the right one for her...*He was... Not Weasley...*

He understood now... To love someone... it didn't mean to let that person go... It meant to fight with everything you have. To do everything in your will power and to *keep* fighting for that person until you finally win her love. Or at least, until you've proven to that person how much you really love her...

*I should have never let you go...* He thought softly as he trailed a single finger down her soft cheek before letting it trace the contours of her rose-red lips, almost tempted to lean forward and claim it with his own.

*Well I want to be selfish now... Because I 'am' selfish... And you 'are' mine, AJ... And 'Malfoys' always...Always get what they want...* Draco thought to himself in silent affirmation and realization, suddenly grinning weakly as he felt some of his Malfoy charm and confidence returning.

*I'm not about to go noble now... I'm a Slytherin, I'm allowed to think only of myself... I'll make you mine, AJ... I promise... I'll never let that chance slip by again...* Draco finally realized, his eyes wide in surprise at the actual simplicity of it all.

"I love you..." He whispered softly into her ear as he leaned forward, letting his lips brush against the tender skin for a minute before he placed a gentle but long kiss onto her scar, following it with more tender kisses around her delicate face.

He was just about to pull back when he caught a faint, weak movement of her lips, causing him to snap his attention back to her face as his heart gave a strong leap of hope inside his chest. Not wanting to hope too soon, he watched with wide eyes as a faint whisper escaped her lips, almost too quiet to be heard but somehow, the single word had caused a sharp pang through his chest.

*"...Draco..."*

Draco froze, his eyes widening as he looked at her carefully, making sure that he had heard her right but it seemed the voice had only been a faint whisper of the wind, causing Draco to sigh and collapse in disappointment.

It hurt him so much to think that she was just right beside him and yet he couldn't do anything to make it known to her that he was... it was as if he was talking to a wall... He knew he had been acting strangely when he talked to her before but there was always that strong hope inside him that somehow... She could hear him... That she could somehow sense his emotions and feelings in the vibrations of his voice...

*How wrong I was then...* He thought bitterly as he lay his head back down on the pillow of the hospital bed again, inhaling the sweet, pure scent that was only AJ's... The scent that had always brought a nervous pounding in his heart back in their younger years...

*And it still does...* He mused weakly with a light chuckle, feeling his heartbeat pound rapidly in his chest that he was sure that should Madam Pomfrey have been in the room, she would have heard it easily.

*I only hope Madam Pomfrey doesn't catch me in here this early in the morning... She might get the wrong idea...* Draco thought to himself in mild amusement, imagining the look on their nurse's when she saw him on the same bed, under the same blanket as her *female* patient.

"Please wake up AJ..." He whispered softly, feeling more lost and alone than he had ever felt in his entire life when he heard the urgency and the despairing boy in his own voice.

That was probably one of the reasons he hated Harry's growing feelings toward Granger... It just made him realize more exactly how much he wanted to feel that way himself... How much *he* wanted someone of his own to love that way...

All he really wanted, was someone of his own to love... To care for and someone of his own to love him in return... Sure, he could have gotten any other girl in school to eagerly become his girlfriend but he didn't want them... He didn't want *any* of them frankly because he knew that none of them could really *love* him the way he wanted to be loved.

He also didn't want cheap sex.... Unlike Harry, he *never* did. He was way tired of getting that from the girls around him... He had always, above anything else, wanted *love*... Love, trust, loyalty, friendship... He wanted someone whom he could just hold in his arms and feel the love radiating off her, regardless if they slept together or not... It was the soft side of him that he would never reveal to anyone if he could help it... The soft romantic behind the snobby jerk he was.

He wanted someone to be there to hold him when he needed her... Someone to smile at him and tell him everything was alright... To stroke his cheek and tell him exactly how much he meant to her.. Someone to care for him when he was hurt... Someone whom he could actually *make love* to... For, even in his experience with the bedroom, he had *never* experienced the art of *making love* before...

He needed love and security... And he knew that only AJ could ever give that kind of love to him... He felt it whenever he was with her... She was the only girl who was ever sensitive enough to show him what exactly really mattered... That was why he fell in love with her in the first place.

He sighed and opened his eyes, lifting his head and looking back to examine her features. He briefly wondered what it would feel like to make love to such a beautiful, yet delicate creature. To have those innocent green eyes staring into his at night, widening in passion or in desire as he showed her how much he loved her.

To have that lithe, slender body pinned underneath him and to have his own lips pressed sensually against hers... To finally claim her as his own... His love...

*Whoa.. Slow down, Malfoy...* ... A voice inside his head pointed out, causing a faint sheepish blush to break out onto his face as he shook the thoughts away, ashamed at having been thinking of such things at AJ's innocent condition.

Chuckling at himself, he looked up and watched her silently again, intertwining his fingers with hers as he let his eyes travel to her lips, a thoughtful look on his face.

*If I kissed her... Would it somehow let her know that I'm here?* He asked her silently, considering the idea as he bit his lip and looked around the empty room, not wanting Madame Pomfrey to catch him kissing one of her patients.

*Hell, she might even think I'm trying to take advantage of AJ or something...* Draco thought in weak mirth, chuckling nervously under his breath before he took a deep breath, slowly leaning forward again.

Just as his face was only an inch away from her own, he stopped abruptly, taking a deep breath just before he closed his eyes and finally pressed his lips gently onto hers, letting his hand caress the smooth curve of her neck as he immediately deepened the kiss, releasing all of the pent up emotion and desire for her through his veins.

He didn't feel her responding but he didn't need to, kissing her with so much force and exhilaration that he even felt his own knees buckle from underneath him, his heart pounding rapidly in his chest as he struggled for his self control, not wanting to overpower her too much.



Then, in an instant, it was over and he was pulling away almost sadly, his lips tingling with the faintest warmth of her sweet lips. He watched her for a long period of time, listening to her steady breathing and admiring the way her skin felt so soft beneath his fingers...

He couldn't imagine who could have done this to her...who could have actually had such sadistic pleasure in trying to end a life as beautiful as her... The thought of it made Draco's eyes darken in rage. He knew his father knew something of it, but it seemed he didn't have any intention of telling Draco anything at the moment.

*Everything*, he said, was to be directed at the Order and not at him and always, Draco would wonder exactly what the *Order* was or why he and Harry were being kept apart from it. Prof. Snape, it seemed, had also been communicating with this said *Order* but neither of them would make any sense to him.

But the thought, just the very *thought* that one of these men, one of those death eaters his father used to be, one of those death eaters whom some had been their family friend for years and had even resided inside their manor at a time being the one who might have killed AJ... It was almost enough for him to hunt them out himself.

He didn't think he would ever feel so much disgust, shame and loathing on the path his father used to take until now... He didn't think he would ever be ashamed of his family... But it seemed now, he was...More than ever... And it didn't help that some of these men, these *death eaters*, were even related to him!

A soft whimper beside him snapped him out of his bitter thoughts, causing him to look at AJ again but only to see a crease of torment on her forehead, as if she was in a nightmare she couldn't get out of.

Draco slowly reached over and took a wash towel from the basin on the bedside table, using the same warm towel to wipe the beads of sweat forming on her forehead. AJ seemed to tense again as the wrinkle on her forehead deepened, making the one flaw on her forehead, her scar, more noticeable.

Draco leaned over and placed a tender kiss on her forehead, pushing back the bangs to reveal that ever so dreaded scar which he wiped

with the wash towel again, watching in relief as the crease seemed to disappear to his gentle administrations.

And almost as though it had never happened at all, AJ's face was once again that blank mask of nonchalance, her form still once more. Draco placed the wash towel back into the basin sadly, feeling his heart drop painfully onto the floor where it had already been once before.

Then, with a soft sigh, he lay down beside her and enveloped her cold lifeless body into his arms once again, not caring in the slightest who came in and saw them in such a position. One last thought lingered in his mind, however, and somehow, he managed the strength to draw it out of his lips.

"Please wake up, AJ... Please... I beg you... *please*..."

**R-Scene:** This is the first R scene I posted so if it sucks, forgive me...

"H-Harry?"

The small meek voice that broke the silence surprised Harry as he immediately looked up from where he had been gazing at the fireplace at the girl he dared not believe had spoken it.

Hermione stood there by the entrance of the bedroom they had been in, her eyes red and sore, her hair a tangled mess but as always... beautiful. Her clothes were now neatly and carefully worn back on and for a slight second, Harry smiled weakly at how neat and primp she always was, even when she wasn't trying to be... It was one of those things that Hermione simply was.

And even in the dim glow of the fire, how he wished that she had not listened to him. That she had not covered that pale, smooth flesh of her slender body and that she was still there, offering herself to him so that Harry may now accept her love, as selfish and arrogant as that may seem.

*You should have told her then!* A voice screamed inside his head but he ignored it, keeping his face steady and unaffected as he regarded her with a blank, calculating look.

Harry felt his heart constrict painfully at the sight of her pained face in response to his cold nonchalance but he masked it with an easy smirk as he glanced at her. "Leaving already, are you?" He asked simply, angry at himself when he heard his own words come out of his own mouth.

If only he had the power to control his own damn forsaken anger... If only he could have controlled the words that came out of his lips at that very moment... but it seemed, that for his sake, for *her* sake, he could *not*.

Hermione flinched but didn't answer, instead, only moving to walk over to the armchair where she had left her things and without a glance at him, she began slowly gathering them up, keeping a blank face as she did so.

She had never been so humiliated in her entire life... Not only had Harry broken her very heart and soul when she had given it to him but he had taken it, smashed it into pieces on the floor with his own feet and had given it back to her with a mocking smile on his face...

It had *hurt*... Hurt so much that she didn't even want to think about the pain anymore. She didn't want to think about *him*. She just wanted to get away from him as far as possible... She needed some time to recuperate herself... To find the very soul she had just lost to the handsome yet deceitful, Slytherin prince in front of her.

She had *never* been rejected like that before... To hell with that, she had never even *offered* herself like that before and to have been rejected like that was a deep wound to her pride as a woman, as a person and as herself. Frankly, at that very moment, she couldn't care if Harry James Potter would burst into thick, orange flames right in front of her. She just did not *care*.

Harry watched her silently, not having the power to say anything that might have caused her to go back, to stay or to hurt her even more. He found that he did not have the courage anymore... He was always the coward...Just like he had been a coward to her about the bet...He couldn't tell her...Not when she was looking at him so trustfully like that... He couldn't bear to shatter her trust.

*Well you didn't shatter her trust alright, Harry. You shattered her 'heart'.* The annoying voice that was his conscience snapped inside him again and he angrily shut it out, feeling a sudden despair start to overcome him as Hermione turned to go.

*No!! Don't call her back, you can't! You won't be able to control yourself any longer if you do! Do it and you'll end up hurting her 'and' yourself in the process!!* Another voice now screamed inside him, sounding ridiculously like his own but nothing seemed to stop him as he stood up abruptly, looking at her.

Hermione stopped suddenly, sensing his movement but she didn't turn around, keeping her eyes coldly glued onto the exit of the poolroom in front of her. In his own rushed stupidity, Harry blurted out the first sentence that came into his mouth.

"So...You *are* leaving then?" He asked, disgusted to hear the cracking in his own voice as he struggled to keep his feet planted firmly where they were.

Hermione snorted in derision, still not turning around as she slowly bowed her head, looking down onto the ground. "It would seem so, wouldn't it?" She asked sarcastically, her voice sounding cold and devoid of any warmth.

Harry didn't answer but he just stared at her tense form, biting his own tongue to keep himself from calling out to her. Three words did come out though and those words couldn't have been more wrong or couldn't have made him more of a hypocrite than he already was.

"*Fine...* Fine then..." He whispered, his voice barely loud enough to be heard but he was certain she had heard it and she had but she did nothing in response. She stood there silently with her back turned against him and her eyes focused ahead.

Hermione breathed softly, her form looking so innocent and fragile against the Slytherin aura of the room around them, not moving at all as Harry sank back onto the armchairs in defeat, burying his head in his arms to hide his shame.

*It's over then... Just like that... I've lost the bet... And I don't even care anymore... Draco was right all along... Slytherins can't afford to love Gryffindors... I never should have let the overwhelming possibility blind me... I should never have caved in... A monster like me deserves to be amongst other monsters... I don't know 'how' to love...* He thought bitterly, feeling the tears now forming in his eyes, blurring his vision and the fire in front of him.

Yet somehow... The most painful part of what he had realized what that it wasn't only the bet he had lost... He hadn't only lost that stupid, foolish little bet... He had lost something more precious than that and that was what hurt him the most...

He had lost Hermione's love... He had lost *her*... And probably he had lost the only chance he'll ever have at having *love, being loved, giving love and... happiness*... He had lost it all... All because of his great identity... *He was a Slytherin, and a Slytherin never knew how to love anything or anyone except its own kind...*

But a strange voice whispered softly in his head, contradicting his bitterness. Strangely, it was telling him that he was wrong. That if he didn't know how to love, how could he felt such love and affection for his twin sister for all their years together? How could he have loved *her*? How he could he had loved his parents long ago? And most importantly, how could he have fallen in love with one of his worst enemies if he himself, did not know how to love?

And why was he crying now? Because he *felt* love... Felt love for this innocent and gentle being that was Hermione... The only girl who had ever managed to shoot an arrow through his ice cold heart and make it melt... The *only* one who had ever made him fall in love with her so much that he would actually let her go, for her to be *happy*.

Even if he *did* know how to love, he could *never* love her in the way that she deserved to be... It would keep coming back. The fights, the heartbreak, the hurt... And he couldn't bear to bring her more. He knew she didn't deserve to handle more and if she was to be with him, *heartbreak* is what she would be receiving.

He was a fool and he knew it... He hid behind his arrogance and his confidence... Inside, he was just the same little boy he was ten years

ago... Nothing has changed... Only the mask of a Slytherin covered and protected the inside... The inside that had never fully developed into something worth loving.

*"I don't know how to love..."* He whispered to himself in his own cold tone of voice that all the others knew way too well, saying the phrase not to inform but to make *himself* believe. Maybe then, if he *did* believe in this, it would make the unbearable feeling of his heart breaking inside him less painful.

Maybe, just maybe, if he could tell his heart that he didn't know love, maybe it would believe him when he said that he didn't know heart break and maybe... Just *maybe*... He could go back to the way he was before...Not caring...Never caring...But never hurt...The one hurting...But he knew...that whatever happened, he could never go back to way he was... The way he used to be... He could never bring that part of himself again because frankly, now, Hermione had become a part of him. Of his life... And without her, his life would never be the same again.

A single tear slowly slipped down from his eyes and began rolling down his pale, cheek but he didn't bother wiping it away as he stared into the blazing, mocking flames in silence. Hermione's form had long disappeared now and somehow, Harry knew she had left... Left him...Never to return to the hell in which he confined her in.

He was alone now... Just as he wanted to be...*Alone*... Just as he will always be. He didn't need anyone now. *No one*, His sister was there, yet only in body but until she awakens, he can survive on his own. He didn't need that kind of *love*.

Before he could snap himself out of his deep torment, he felt a warm, gentle hand caress the side of his face lovingly; wiping away the tear that still remained on his cheek with her thumb.

*Hermione*... He thought, looking up slowly, almost fearfully, to see her warm brown eyes looking back at him.

So she hadn't left... Her eyes seemed softer now... More understanding but she didn't say anything else, only standing over his

sitting form and puller him to her, wrapping her arms around him as he buried his face onto her slender form.

He didn't say anything but he felt her stroke his back gently, leaning down to whisper something in his ear. "I don't believe you." She said simply, her words bold and daring as any Gryffindor would have spoken it, surprising Harry with how confident and accusing she sounded.

Almost instantly, he pulled back, glaring up at her with blazing emerald green eyes, his face twisted into a mask of raged denial.

"What?!" He snapped as he stood up and moved away from her as fast as he could, careful not to show any signs of other emotions except anger.

"I said, I don't believe you." She said once more, her voice now cold and unforgiving as she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him, challenging him to deny it.

Harry sneered, hoping that was enough to stop her as he tried to look down at her in contempt, not wanting to believe her boldness. "Who said you had to, *mudblood*?!" He said snidely, laughing at his own harshness but he felt a terrible clenching of his chest at the sound of his own words.

It seemed for a moment, it had worked and Hermione's face and courage faltered for a second, letting Harry see the hurt and pain in her brown eyes but it was replaced again with confidence as she stepped forward towards him, keeping her gaze on his face.

"I don't believe you... I know you Harry. I know you well enough now to tell you that you're a lying bastard. I don't now why but you're doing this because of something and I want to know what that is." She demanded simply, keeping her gaze locked onto me until Harry himself looked away in defeat.

"I told you, it's because I...I-I don't know how to—"

"That's just a load of crap, Potter!" She interrupted, her eyes glazing to life with so much anger that Harry stepped back in slight fear.

He blinked and looked at her, not daring and not *wanting* to believe what he was hearing from Hermione's own mouth. "Excuse me?"

"You know as well as I do that you're just a coward at heart. You're afraid again now, aren't you? Afraid of something once again just like you were afraid of losing me to Viktor before? Dammit, *tell* me, Harry! Tell me so I can share what you feel! So we can be afraid together!" She shouted at him, anger now unhidden in her features.

Harry glared at her, his face hardened and his eyes gleaming maliciously like two emeralds in the darkly illuminated room. Yet, he didn't answer. He merely glared at her, silently daring her to go on.

Hermione took the chance, letting all her hidden anger and pain inside which she had been keeping for so long already, keeping her eyes firmly focused on the emerald ones in front of him.

"You're nothing but a sick little coward, Potter! You hide behind your hostility and your arrogance but I can see through you now—you're nothing. I know you now, Potter... You're afraid. You're afraid of me... You're afraid of me that you can't stand the idea of being with me!" Hermione hissed softly at him, returning his glare with a defiant glint in her eyes.

"I'm not afraid of *you*, Hermione. I'm just afraid I can't love—"

"You say you're afraid of love... You're afraid of this love yet you made love to all those girls... Why can't you make love to ME? Why am I so different, Harry?! *Why?*!" She demanded, not giving him the chance to finish his sentence as she watched his expression change from a variety of pained emotions.

"Because I...I...Dammit Granger! I never *made love* before!! It was all sex! Just sex!" He blurted out, his eyes widening and taking on a child-like desperation as he struggled to maintain his composure but Hermione didn't seem to care.

"Then for Merlin's sake, Harry, why am I the exception?! Why must you always try to hide things from me?! Why can't you love me the way you loved them?! Why can't you take me?! Make me yours!" She



pleaded once more, her warm coffee brown eyes filling with tears of frustration and anger, blurring her vision.

"If I loved you the way I loved those useless whores, I wouldn't love you at all, Granger..." Was the calm, cold reply, betrayed slightly by the shaking in the Slytherin's voice but Hermione didn't notice as she gasped in insult and walked forward to slap him.

Harry easily caught her hand in his before it once again made contact with his cheek as it had done so many times before and the mere contact of both their skins caused a faint, familiar tingling on both their palms, enough for Hermione to yank her hand roughly away.

She backed away for a long moment, closing her eyes and trying to calm the anger bubbling inside her as Harry watched her silently from where he still sat, his face a calm, expressionless mask that contrasted easily with the conflict of emotions he hid underneath.

Hermione took a deep shaky breath before she turned and faced him again, her face neutral as she let her voice barely rise above a hoarse whisper.

"All those times you wanted me, Harry... And all those times, I denied *you*. But here I am, offering myself to you, offering my body, my soul, *every* part of me for you and you refuse me! Why?" She asked steadily, as though preparing herself for the heartbreaking answer.

Harry sighed wearily, not looking at her as he stood up and walked over to the fireplace, watching the dancing flames as he thought of the right words to say.

"Because I can't... I... It's changed now, Hermione. I can't be the same anymore. I can *never* be the same again. Things have changed...I—"

"Harry, *why*—"

"Because of *you*! I can't go back to the way I was because of *you*!" He exploded, interrupting her impatiently, causing Hermione to jump in surprise at the angry tone in his voice.

The two stared at each other for the longest time; Hermione's eyes wide with shock and Harry's eyes narrowed with fury, both unwilling to look away from the other until Harry finally caved first, gazing at the fire.

A long tense silence followed after that... Harry staring absent-mindedly into the flames and Hermione watching him, her eyes as intense as the fire themselves as they burned right through Harry's back.

After a long moment of unsaid thoughts and feelings, Hermione finally spoke up once more, breaking the silence between them when she walked towards him and gently turned him around to face her, tilting his chin up for his eyes to meet her sad brown orbs.

"Let's make it easier right now, Harry... Tell me... Did you ever really love me? Tell me the truth now because if you say no, then I'll leave you alone, Harry. I swear I will... Just say the word and I'll walk out that door. You'll never have to worry about the mudblood again." She whispered softly but Harry caught her words clearly, sending a chill right through his spine.

*No! I do love you Hermione! I love you so much but that's the problem!* He mentally shouted to her but his mouth remained firmly closed and he found that no matter how much he willed himself, he could not do anything but remain silent and stare back at her blankly, leaving her question unanswered.

Hermione stared at his face intently for a long time, almost as though there was still a fierce hope inside her that Harry would, for once, admit to his true feelings and face the truth but he merely stared defiantly into her, not responding to her words.

Even at that moment, he could hear what those eyes of hers were saying... They were almost telling him to surrender... To surrender to his passion... To his desire... To his love... *That*, he just could not do.

*Her eyes...on me...* Came a faint whisper in his head but he refused to acknowledge it, straining to keep his emotions pent up inside of him.

Then, finally, those coffee orbs slowly descended onto the ground and Hermione's face crumpled in pain. She turned away and began walking towards the door, holding her sobs within her until she was sure she had left the room.

If she had any of her dignity left to spare, it was that she would never allow the Slytherin to see her cry again. He had already caused her so many tears already that she didn't want to give him the pleasure of more. She had wasted too much of herself...

Harry remained like a statue from where he was, watching her cross the beautiful Slytherin poolroom towards the door, his own eyes filling silently with tears of kept pain and torture.

It seemed, with every step she took away from him, he felt as though her heart was growing farther and farther away from him and he knew that once she had opened that door and stepped outside, she was lost to him forever. As soon as she left the room, she would have left his life...

He couldn't have that... *I can't have that...* He thought suddenly, his eyes widening and his thoughts all fusing together as one as he jolted into action.

Just as Hermione reached out for the door, Harry turned and ran towards her, grabbing her hand in his and whirling her around to face him, a lost look of despair on his handsome features.

"No! Please don't!! I-I... You can't leave... You can't leave like this!" He heard himself blurt out, hardly aware of what he was doing anymore as he faced her confused, red-rimmed eyes.

Hermione stared back at him, obviously waiting for him to say more but Harry could only return the stare silently, his eyes swirling with so much unsaid emotions and feelings that were just dying to be released from him.

"What then? Tell me what you want, Harry! Don't *make* me guess what's inside your head! Don't make me guess what you feel in that cold heart of yours because I *can't*, Harry! You have to *tell* me!" She screamed at him in exasperation, shoving him away.

That did it... Harry reeled backwards for the first time at her surprising strength and now felt the restrained tears falling furiously down his cheeks, angry at himself for losing to his emotions once again.

"It's not you! Okay? I just... I didn't... I *couldn't*... I couldn't make love to you... I don't deserve to be the guy you give yourself too... Don't waste this opportunity on me... Please.... You'd be much better off with someone else...." He answered weakly, now crying as he backed away from her, hiding his face.

He turned his eyes away, walking away from her and sinking back into the armchair he had been sitting at when she found him, dropping his head onto his hands. Hermione hadn't noticed what he was doing until she heard the soft sobs coming from the Slytherin and the anguish she heard in them was enough to cause her own tears to break out from her eyes.

Almost instinctively, she felt her eyes soften at his form as she quietly approached him, careful not to draw any attention to herself until she had knelt in front of him, using her hands to pry his hands away from his face.

Then, staring into his swollen, teary and glistening emerald green eyes... The eyes every girl in Hogwarts had fallen in love with... The eyes *she* had fallen in love with... Those emerald eyes that got him what he wanted, she asked him the one question any girl would never have dared to ask before...

"Answer me Harry... *Do you love me?*"

Harry blinked and looked at her, not responding but Hermione easily found the answer in his eyes and without knowing why, she left the corner of her lips lift into a weak, teary smile, stroking his cheek with her fingers.

Harry turned away but didn't move away from the touch, closing his eyes for a long moment before he answered. ".....So What if I did..... It doesn't matter... Just... leave me alone Hermione, please, just stay away from me... You'd be better off without me... You wouldn't want someone like me—"

Hermione gave a bitter laugh, interrupting him and shook her head, causing Harry to see the mocking smirk on her face.

“Don’t you think I know that already, Harry? Don’t you think I already know that I wouldn’t *want* someone like *you* to be the one I fell in love with? I never really had a choice in that matter, now did I?!” She retorted coldly, ignoring the slightly hurt look she saw reflected in the Slytherin’s eyes for one split second.

“I knew that from the very start already! I knew that the minute I saw you in the Astronomy tower! I didn’t want *you*! But unfortunately, for both you *and* me, Harry, it’s not me who decides who I fall for... And most *unfortunately* for me, my stupid, foolish heart still chose *you*.” She finished flatly, glaring at him in utter loathing that Harry felt his chest constrict painfully as he looked down, ashamed to meet her gaze.

“Unfortunately...” He echoed in a deathly, fully aware that though Hermione’s words had hurt, each and every single one of them was true. So maybe he *was* making the right choice then... She’d be better off without him... But... What if he didn’t want to be right anymore? What if he wanted to be wrong? Because if what he was doing was the right thing to do, why did it all suddenly feel so wrong to him? What then, was the right choice exactly?

Hermione looked at him for the last, final time, using her soft, delicate hands to turn his face towards hers again as she leaned in until her own face was merely inches away from his, their lips yearning for the other’s caress.

“Harry.... *Please*... I... I love you and I want to be yours... and I want you to be mine... *Please*...Take me, *show* me...” She whispered, pressing her forehead onto his and keeping her eyes locked onto his own as Harry let out a gasp of desire that rippled through his body.

“I...I-I *do* love you Hermione...” He replied in a throaty whisper, barely able to control himself any longer as he struggled to keep himself from doing exactly what she wanted and taking her into his arms.

Finally, despite her tears, Hermione allowed her beautiful face to break out into a warm, loving smile before she slowly stood up and gently sat onto his lap, feeling Harry's inner struggle with his own desire for her through his responses.

"Then please, Harry...Please... Don't try to fight it anymore...I want you...now..." She whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck and stroking the tender skin there, waiting patiently for Harry to initiate the passion.

For a moment, it seemed Harry wasn't going to respond, closing his eyes and biting his lip as he briefly tried to conquer his own growing lust once again, clenching his hands into tight fists but when he felt Hermione's gentle administrations on his neck, he lost it altogether.

*Surrender... Surrender to it...*

Letting out a low growl in his throat, Harry yanked her towards him and claimed her lips hungrily with his own, his hands immediately wrapping around her and pressing her body closer and tighter against his own form.

Hermione held back a surprised gasp as the kiss took on a whole new wavelength altogether, both their desire and longing for the other exploding within their intertwined lips and limbs. She moaned as she felt Harry's skilled hands traveling around her form, lingering on the parts he knew affected her most and made her squirm with arousal.

Harry deepened their kiss as he gently eased his lips down from her lips onto the curve of her neck, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin there as Hermione closed her eyes and merely allowed herself to enjoy the wonderful sensation it created within her.

She felt Harry pull her closer as he continued to kiss and taste that tender skin on her neck and only until she felt him bite her there did she realize what he was doing. She let out soft hiss of pain, feeling the small cut already forming.

Harry merely kissed the blood away, ravishing the particular spot on her neck for a certain amount of time until he pulled back, satisfied at the purple bruise he left there to mark her as his own...

He let out a lopsided smile as he gently trailed his kisses up her neck again, stopping to place a lingering kiss onto the lobe of ear before he whispered something sensually into her ear.

*"Mine..."*

Hermione shivered as his hot breath made the skin on her ear tingle and she almost giggled with nervousness but she held herself back, knowing such a stupid response would have spoiled the mood if she had.

Harry had met her lips again, only this time it wasn't the same gentle, loving kiss as before... It was fierce... Passionate and hungry... Driven with a strong force that left her helpless to what he wanted to take...Something that she knew she would be willing to give him.

Slowly, without parting his lips from hers, he gathered Hermione's lithe body into his lean arms, gently urging her to wrap her long legs around his waist before he stood up and began heading towards the bedroom, an obvious intention in mind.

Hermione wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and her legs tightly around his waist to keep from falling while Harry easily supported her with his own arms, carrying her to the soft, lush four-poster bed.

She didn't have any time to think when Harry had dropped her onto the bed with him on top of her, her legs still wrapped around him as he started ravishing her neck again, his hands working on the buttons of her blouse.

Hermione responded easily, surprised to find her own hands hurriedly taking on a mind of their own, one hand working on the unbuckling of his belt and the other in the process of trying to remove his shirt.

Hermione felt Harry chuckle his seductive laugh against her neck before he briefly pulled away, causing Hermione to whimper in protest but Harry gently pressed a finger to her lips to indicate for her to be quiet.

She watched, her eyes widening in nervousness and her cheeks flushing as he peeled off his shirt, once more revealing the lean, firm body that girls around the school have often dreamed of running their hands over and having pressed against them.

For a short moment, he gave her an impish grin before he carefully slid the blouse she still had on off her delicate body, carelessly letting the blouse drop down onto the floor. Hermione felt a warm blush rise up her cheeks as Harry scrutinized her form, letting his eyes travel over her half-naked body before he met her eyes and smiled, the lust and desire evident in his features.

Again, he positioned himself on top of her and for the first time, Hermione felt herself shiver as she felt the warm contact of his skin on hers, causing a delightful tingle to run down both of their spines.

Hermione tilted her chin up for a kiss again which Harry willingly granted, this time kissing her gently and tenderly in reassurance, sensing the tense nervousness from Hermione's figure. Leaning over to her ear, he kissed her once more before speaking.

"I won't hurt you..." He murmured, kissing her ear again as he felt the girl beneath him relax slightly, yet Hermione used her hand to make Harry's face meet hers again, looking deep into his eyes as she spoke.

"I know..." She whispered, kissing him affectionately as Harry gave her a soft smile, his eyes sparkling with so much love and affection that she hardly recognized them as his at all.

*Eyes on Me...* She thought for a brief moment but that thought was soon extinguished as Harry kissed her again, this time, his hand moving down her curvy figure onto her long legs, trailing his hands over the smooth skin.

Hermione squirmed at his touch as he let his hand travel the length of her legs until he finally reached the clasp of her skirt, breaking the kiss to look at her questioningly in the eyes, allowing Hermione the sudden doubt and concern in his own.



“Are you sure you want to do this, Hermione?” He asked softly, his eyes peering down onto her large, trusting brown ones but Hermione only nodded slowly and pulled him to her once more, finally unbuttoning his pants and slipping them off easily with a slight blush.

Harry froze in surprise at her bold move before he chuckled to himself, hiding a smirk as Hermione’s eyes lingered on the black boxers he wore underneath, her cheeks darkening into an interesting shade of magenta.

“Like what you see, Granger?” He teased affectionately under his breath but he didn’t bother waiting for an answer, meeting their lips instantly before she got the chance to respond to his taunt.

It seemed the silence of the room was filled only with the soft sounds of passion and love from them, the fire slowly dimming into a faint fervent green and the shimmering glitters hovering above the two lovers as they kissed.

Neither had noticed the magical thickening of the swirling, sweet-smelling mist around them, lingering on their forms over the bed and adding to the romantic atmosphere radiated from the love they were making.

“I love you...” Hermione gasped softly into Harry’s ear, finally pulling their now bare bodies closer together, just thrilling in the feel of Harry’s skin pressed onto hers, their forms fitting together so perfectly it was almost like they had been made for each other.

Harry smiled gently at her, using one hand to stroke her silky, flushed cheek, feeling her trembling under him in unreleased passion as she waited for him to initiate the movement, her eyes wide, trusting and fearful all at the same time.

“I love *you*...” He whispered in response, leaning over to give her one last lingering kiss on the lips before he finally entered her, feeling Hermione’s soft cry of pain and pleasure through their locked lips yet, thriving on nothing more than the feeling of finally being a part of the girl he loved...

“Harry...”

A dark shadow sneered to himself as he slowly wrapped his long, lanky fingers around the doorknob to the hospital wing, an evil intention seen through the coldness of his dark eyes. Silently, he looked around the dark hospital room, seeing the sleeping forms of many other students on other beds, making sure that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight.

Then, with a snake-like smile, he stepped into the silence, his sadistic smile growing wider when he saw that all the curtains around each and every student in bed had been drawn around them, shielding their vision of anything outside so they couldn't see him.

Swiftly, he shut the door carefully behind him, careful not to make the slightest sound as he moved like a tiger about to advance upon his prey to the bed at the very end of the room where he knew his target lay.

He was about to reach a hand out to pull the curtains back when he stopped abruptly, slipping his hand into his pocket instead to look for something. Then, with a smirk, he easily took the dangerous device out of his robe pocket, holding it up to inspect it with his eyes.

It was a carefully concocted death potion...And he was sure of it *this* time... *No more foul-ups*... He couldn't afford to have any more foul-ups for his lord and master... He couldn't afford to make a mistake again.

He had a strange, sick smile on his face as he carefully examine the object in his hand... It was the death potion alright... Twice as powerful as a regular one...Concocted by the dark lord himself... And yet, this time, it was in the form of a lethal injection, ready for him to inject it into the pesky brats...

*Pesky brats*... He thought, remembering the words his lord had called them. *Pesky children*... *brats*... Always bothering his master... Always bringing him nuisances and irritation... Well no more now... He would make sure of that... He would kill them both, starting with *this* one...And then, that would make his master happy. He *strived* to keep his master happy.

*And after I'm through...Lord Voldemort will never have to worry about Harry or AJ Potter every again...* He thought, chuckling softly under his breath as he carefully tightened callous fingers around the injection, eager to plunge the sharp object right into AJ Potter's delicate skin.

*You can't escape from me this time, child...* He thought silently to himself as he reached over and slowly began pulling the curtain away to reveal her bed, finally seeing her form covered from head to foot in her white blanket.

"To die in white..." He whispered mockingly, almost laughing out loud at the irony of it as he tightened his fingers around the injection, readying himself to plunge it into her as soon as he drew back the covers.

"May your eternal dreams be sweet always..." He hissed out in utter hatred, his real *and* magical eye flashing as he finally laid a hand on the white cover and held the injection up in the air with his other hand, ready to stab it right into the sleeping figure.

Then, roughly, he yanked the white covers back and made to plunge the cold, sharp needle right into her form but he stopped abruptly, his eyes going ridiculously wide with shock and anger as he beheld the scene in front of him.

There, entirely covering the girl's much smaller body with his own, lay Lucius Malfoy's son, his arms wrapped around her and his whole body unknowingly curled around hers, somewhat fitting right against her like a perfect frozen puzzle.

*Draco...* He realized, watching the figure of the blonde boy unknowingly tighten his arms around AJ, the protective gesture almost making him curse them out loud in disgust. *Damn teenage hormones...* He thought spitefully, glaring at both sleeping figures in front of him in impatience and anger.

The dark figure looming over them stared in growing frustration, watching as Draco shifted slightly but kept his hold onto the girl beside him almost as though by some strange, unknown instinct, he knew what was going to happen if he didn't.

Draco must have been with her the whole day and night and somehow, he had fallen asleep right beside her, not knowing he would actually be the reason for her to escape *this* death for now...*For now...* He promised them darkly, his silent thought echoing again and again in his head, causing a sneer to break out onto his face.

He couldn't risk harming Lucius' son... He was very much aware that Lucius was his master's right hand follower and harming his son might have meant challenging his anger... He couldn't harm Draco if he wished to get on Lucius' good side...

...*Not yet anyway...* He added to himself, sneering in contempt at the tender scene the two teenagers made before him... Draco's arms protectively wrapped around AJ... His face pressed and buried into the crook of her neck, blonde hair brushing against her cheek...One hand left tangled in the silk tresses of her hair...

Almost as if by some weird instinct, he might have known what would have happened and made sure she was safe... How he absolutely *hated* the boy... He never did get a good impression of the younger Malfoy ever since the whole *ferret* incident.

*Like father like son...* He thought, shaking his head in disgust as he briefly remembered his constant rivalry with Lucius for years now. And as soon as he had laid eyes on his son Draco, he knew that he would just be the same. One who cowers away by allying himself with the one with the most power...

Lucius with Voldemort... And now, Draco with his father's enemy, Harry Potter... Despicable they were... The Malfoys did *not* deserve to be branded with such a powerful family name... They were nothing but cowards.

*Damn them all to hell... I'd kill them both if I ever get the chance...*  
*Damn this miserable ferret...* He thought but he took a step back, momentarily trying to calm his own anger.

*Wait...be patient...* He reassured himself. The time would come when he would finally please his lord and when he will finally best Lucius at being Lord Voldemort's most faithful follower and servant... And

when that time came....He will not only kill Lucius...But Draco as well, and all the Malfoys he knew...

*Malfoys were always traitors... They never deserved that power... They weren't suffering when Voldemort had supposedly died... They cowered like the rats they were and only returned when he was back...* He thought scornfully, feeling a strong surge of hate.

Yet somehow, there was something about Lucius now that he couldn't quite explain... And he *didn't* trust it... There was a strange kind of *aura* around him that he knew was something to be suspicious of...*Definitely...* He just didn't have anything against him to prove it.

*Maybe if I could sneak the injection somehow...* His thoughts trailed off as he eyed a particular open spot on AJ's arm that was unprotected by Draco's embrace.

His hand tightened swiftly around the injection in his hand and a strange sense of anxiety in him was eager enough for him to almost plunge the sharp needle into the pale skin of the girl in front of him despite the boy beside her.

*Perhaps I could do it now...Perhaps if I just—* But the thought vanished as he neared them once more, his eyes narrowing when the silver dragon pendant hanging from Draco's neck had suddenly sprung to life, growling at him, its eyes glowing suspiciously in the dark.

*Oh lucky me...One of those enchanted protection pendants...* He thought sarcastically, glaring back at the hissing pendant as it died away the minute he had stepped back from the bed again, the possibility of killing AJ extinguished from his mind.

"Fine then... Draco... You have saved her for now...I hope to see you *and* your father in hell..." He hissed angrily, his eyes glaring and burning down at the future Malfoy heir, lingering on the beautiful pendant around his neck. He could wait for now... Perhaps he might get the chance at Draco when he followed his father's footsteps as well...

Still muttering to himself, he slowly drew the curtain back around the sleeping couple again, cautiously slipping the injection back into his robe pockets before he turned and silently began to make his way out of the room. He felt his anger radiating from him but he made no attempt to lock it up, growling just as he reached the door.

His fingers clasped around the knob once more and once again, he was walking swiftly out, noisily shutting the door behind him in a rude motion. Then, just as he was about to turn and walk down the corridor, he whirled around and gave one last lingering look on the door of the hospital wing.

“Soon my lord...*Soon...*”

With that, Prof. Moody spun around and began angrily striding down the corridor towards his tower, his magical eye whirring about noisily and his black robes swishing carelessly behind his form.

“Tell me again Harry...” Hermione murmured teasingly, snuggling closer and resting her head on his bare chest as the two snuggled under the covers that night, her eyes shining with love and adoration.

Harry grinned and pretended not to remember, raising an eyebrow at her in question. “Tell you what again, Hermione? That I’m tired and I want to go to sleep? He kidded, earning him a painful whack from the girl beside him as she laughed.

“No, you git! Tell me how beautiful you think I am...” She said, rolling over so that her own body was on top of his, both of them fitting the other perfectly as Harry pulled the silk sheets tighter around them for warmth.

“What? Did I say anything like that? I don’t recall, Granger...” He teased again, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her closer, pressing their foreheads together until they were both staring right into the other’s eyes.

Hermione glared at him, attempting to pull away but Harry only laughed and tightened his hold on her loving the way her silky skin felt pressed onto his own and how their bodies radiated heat off to one another.

“You’re the smartest, sweetest, most beautiful girl I know...I love you.” He whispered once again into her ear, sending a delightful shiver down her spine as Harry leaned over and placed a kiss onto her cheek, running his hand soothingly up and down her back.

Hermione squirmed at the intimate contact, blushing darkly as Harry’s finger’s send weak bolts of electricity where they grazed her skin, causing her to purr in response as she buried her head onto his chest again, sighing.

Harry smiled and ran one hand through her now disheveled hair, closing his eyes and trying to remember the events that had happened. He hadn’t been able to cOntrol himself anymore... He had lost it all the minute Hermione had offered herself to him once again...

*I’m only human...* He thought weakly, gently stroking Hermione’s hair over and over again as Hermione snuggled against closer to him, yawning sleepily.

To say that Hermione was the best experience he ever had was a complete understatement... He had absolutely never felt anything like what he had felt when he made love to her in his arms... It was...It was *amazing*... He never knew he could experience that kind of intimate love before until now...

*She’s beautiful...* He thought admiringly, his gaze lingering on the delicate figure on him, softening in affection and adoration as he watched her sleep, snuggling closer to him for warmth.

She sighed in contentment, unconsciously leaning into his tender touch as Harry allowed a smile to grace his proud features... A smile he would have never shown anyone else besides those whom he genuinely cares about...

*I don’t have to tell her anything about the bet because frankly, as of now...The bet’s off...* He thought suddenly, his face twisting into a determined scowl as he pictured the reaction on Draco’s face when he told him.

Slowly, he let a harsh smirk form onto his lips where his warm smile had once been...like a ghost of his former self... He could almost hear Draco's words already... *"You're weak Potter... Weak...You disgust me..."*

*Weak...* He thought in contempt, wanting nothing more than to spit out the ridiculous word. Now, it seemed, he finally realized that he was anything *but* weak... He had given in and faced the truth... He couldn't have been stronger if he tried... And then, he imagined the look on his sister's face when he told her about everything that had happened these past few weeks right under her very nose... She wouldn't be happy with him when she woke up and found out that he had fallen for her worst enemy.. Not at all...

*She'll accept us...* He thought confidently, trying to reassure himself of the statement but a crease in his features betrayed him, letting him know that despite everything, a fear of acceptance still resided within him.

*There's nothing I can do about that now... I've gone in too deep already...* He thought, sighing heavily and reaching over to the bedside table where one of his most precious valuables lay, clasping it tightly in his hand.

Smiling softly, he briefly inspected the sparkling silver pocket watch, his eyes lingering on the image of him and his twin sister inside. Inside, the arrows corresponding to AJ, Draco and Sirius have already been made and several other blank arrows waited to be assigned to another person.

Lifting his wand, he whispered the spell AJ had taught him before to mark another arrow and then, with a grin, he added Hermione to the group, her arrow ironically assuming the one next to AJ's arrow.

For a moment, Harry just stared at the watch in his hand... At the two special women in his life... How he missed his sister... Somehow, he knew, despite everything else, AJ was one of those few people who could understand him for what he felt for Hermione... She was one of those people who could actually care...



Then, closing his eyes drearily, he gently set the pocket watch back onto the table, yawning tiredly for a split second before he glanced around the room, finally noticing the surroundings around them.

Their robes were long forgotten and had been strewn carelessly on the floor beside the bed... Their bare forms lay snuggled together underneath the emerald green sheets, their hair tousled and disheveled and their bodies warm with intimate contact.

The fire in the room had brightened somewhat to a relaxing shade that gave the room a warm, peaceful and subtle atmosphere while the incense candles were nearly burnt out, its scent lingering strongly in the silent bedroom.

For a long moment, Harry just stared off into the flickering flames in front of him, thinking about all the past events that had happened to them this year... It seemed as though everything had been some kind of rushed plague that up until now, he couldn't quite take into mind...

*Everything...* From being with his twin at the Dursleys... Learning and practicing dark spells with Draco at Malfoy Manor... the riot in the Quidditch World Cup... The bet he and Draco had made that had actually been the start of it all... The start of his soon to be blossoming relationship with Hermione...

All the times he had played his seductive charms on Hermione and all the times she refused him relentlessly, making him grow more and more frustrated and yet, determined to win her affection for him... *In more ways than one.* Harry thought fondly, smirking to himself.

No other girl had ever managed to have Hermione's admirable courage and strength of conviction in refusing him like that... *No one...* And it was that exact same courage and strength that made Harry fall in love with her in the first place.

*She made me 'fight' for her... She didn't give in to me that easily... She made me wait and she made me suffer before she started opening up... I actually worked hard for her... One of the reasons I care for her unlike the others I got my way with easily...* He mused to himself, amused at the irony of it all.

*No wonder she's the top student in the year... She could have been a Slytherin too... Sly trick to make me fall for her if you ask me...* He thought, chuckling as he stroked her hair again, shaking his head in amusement.

The only one to turn the tables on him without him knowing... The only one who had made *him* the fool and who had made *him* beg for her and *him* trip all over his robes to make her happy... The only who had managed to throw the rope and whip him to her... Because definitely, there was no denying it... *Harry James Potter was officially whipped...* And... He surprised himself more when he realized that... *He loved every minute of it...* He grinned to himself, blushing lightly at his own thoughts as he shook them away, concentrating on the fire yet again.

Then... There had been seeing Parvati, that bitch... The bitch that had seemed to cause so many barriers between them already... He never should have gotten involved with her in the first place. He should have taken his twin's advice before... She had been nothing but trouble.

If he had never gotten involved with her, she probably wouldn't have been chasing after him until now. He was just surprised and amazed at her resilience and determination. No other girl he had dated in the past had ever continued to pursue him after he broke up with her. All of them had been too humiliated by him to try again.

*That girl... relentless...* He thought, sighing as he shook his head. Maybe *he* had been wrong to lead her on like that but he couldn't dismiss the fact that she had *let* herself be used too... She *knew* what Harry was like... She just expected too much from him. Something Harry would *never* give her.

Of course there was Durmstrang and Beauxbatons... Then that champion fiasco... And it seemed, right after that, came another important event that must have started the chain reaction to his growing feelings towards Hermione... *That night in the Astronomy Tower...* *That* had started it all... That was when they had called a truce and became friends. And that was when Harry had finally asked Hermione on an actual date...

Harry smiled as he recalled the way Hermione looked that night when he had come to pick her up on their date... The first time she had straightened her hair... *For him...* Not for anyone else. She wanted to be beautiful for *him* and the thought was enough to make his heart do somersaults in his chest.

The TriWizard tournament...The first task...Being with Hermione in the healing tents... Being with her in the Quidditch Pitch...Rejected and hurt...The painful weeks before the Yule Ball when Harry had hurt his twin, his best friend *and* Hermione...And then... The Yule Ball itself...Hermione going with Krum...When his entire world had spun a full 360 degree turn and he had admitted his feelings for Hermione...

Their dance...Their special, unforgettable dance...The very night his twin...AJ got attacked right after the Yule Ball when she and Draco were supposed to get together at his own initiative... The night he should have obeyed his scar and saved her...

Harry felt bitter tears tinge his eyes but he knew better than to let them fall, knowing they couldn't be of much use to him anyway if he did. Instead, he leaned down and kissed Hermione on the forehead as all the past events began racing into his mind one by one...

*The disappearance of Crouch after the attack...All those articles that Skeeter had made about them... Meetings with Sirius... At Hogsmeade with Hermione...Hermione talking to AJ in the Hospital wing...The Second task...Hermione being Krum's hostage...That day in the closet with Hermione...*

Harry shuddered as he thought about it, remembering how passionate and intimate the scene had been when they had been snogging each other in the closet. All those events seemed for far off now... Almost as though they had existed in another time...Far from where they were at the moment...

Then...The way Hermione had looked at him when she was unbuttoning her blouse for him...Her eyes so wide and trusting that it hurt Harry to think that he was deceiving her... Harry closed his eyes, trying to cast the memory from his mind.

Feeling a strong surge of guilt and remorse begin to well up inside him again, he slowly untangled his arms from around the slender girl in front of him, bending down to kiss her lightly on the cheek before he stood up.

He didn't bother pulling anything on to cover himself as he positioned himself on the armchair in front of the fire, closing his eyes in contentment from the fire's warmth that suddenly enveloped him.

With glassy eyes, he watched the fire's flames flickering silently in front of him, enjoying the way the fire seemed to capture the very green in his own eyes and reflect it back at him easily. In the fire's flames, he saw himself...A reflection...

Harry couldn't help but sneer scornfully at the beautiful image he seemed to make within the flames. *The sexy Slytherin...* He thought contemptuously, disgusted at the boy he saw in front of him.

It seemed no matter how pale and creamy his skin was...How his smile could have made the most confident girls falter...How his eyes caught the gazes of those around him, he was actually *dirty* and *disgusting* inside..

He recalled how many other nights Harry had spent in this room to think...Away from his twin...Away from his best friend... Away from *everyone*. He had made sure never to bring any other girl in this room for a good lay because frankly, he couldn't stand the idea of one of those girls dirtying up the pure, beautiful sheets...

Hell, sometimes, he couldn't even stand sleeping in his own bed back up at the Slytherin Dormitories because of the lingering various scents of his past girlfriends left there... He couldn't bear being so near around the aura's he shattered with his charms and he believed, if anything, that their different auras have been imprinted in that bed.

He heard a soft sigh behind him and he smiled to himself, turning around to see Hermione snuggling deeper into the side of the bed he had lain in, a soft smile on her features. Somehow though, he didn't mind it if Hermione's scent and aura lingered in this particular bed... Hermione was pure and beautiful... He loved the feel of having her aura surround him.

He stayed that way for a long time...Just watching Hermione sleep peacefully from where he sat, not at all taking notice of the time or the consequences they would both have to face once they stepped back into the world outside.

Then, after a long period of time, he sighed and stared back into the fireplace, using it as a mirror to inspect his appearance... hair as black as night...Eyes as green as emeralds... Skin pale and glowing... *AJ*... He suddenly thought, blinking rapidly as he briefly saw the image of his twin sister in his own face.

*We really 'do' look alike then...* He thought, allowing a small chuckle as he shook his head and looked away just as Hermione began to stir behind him again, her body searching for Harry on the bed. Harry smirked in amusement and sat there, watching as Hermione finally noticed he was gone and she sat up, pulling the sheets over her bare figure, her sleepy eyes searching hastily around the room.

Then, seeing Harry there, her eyes visibly relaxed and she gave him a shy smile, her cheeks tingeing with the lightest blush of pink.

"Hey..." She whispered softly, wrapping the sheets around herself and sitting up until she got a full view of him. She blushed even darker when she noticed that unlike her, Harry had not bothered to cover himself up, sitting there with all his naked glory.

Harry let out an easy, teasing smile, his eyes sparkling with light humor. "Like what you see, don't you Granger?" He kidded, laughing when Hermione grabbed a pillow and chucked it at him, blushing darker in embarrassment.

"You are...and will *a/ways* be...An arrogant Slytherin prat." She sat flatly, rolling her eyes as Harry grinned and beckoned her to him, his eyes softening.

Hermione sighed but complied, keeping the sheets wrapped tightly around her body as she walked over to the armchair where he sat, stifling a protest when Harry wrapped his arms around her and pulled her onto his lap, pressing his forehead against hers.

“You’re beautiful...” He murmured, brushing his lips over hers for a faintest moment before he pulled her to his chest in a hug, burying his face in her neck.

Hermione smiled and snuggled into his strong embrace, loving the way Harry’s hand was stroking her hair and the way he nuzzled her neck affectionately. She had no regrets about what happened... She had loved every moment of it and tonight would be one of the most important nights in her life...

Harry had been completely gentle with her... He hadn’t forced her into anything she was afraid of doing at all and had touched her as though she was made of the most delicate glass that would have broken if handled too roughly...

It was hard to believe there had been such hatred and animosity between them when they were younger and that Harry was the boy so well-known for hurting others because he touched her as though she was the most beautiful girl in the world to him..

So gentle and careful that it often brought tears to her eyes...She wouldn’t have chosen any other guy out there to give herself to...She loved Harry with all her soul, heart and body and she knew now that he returned the feeling.

That alone was enough for her to forget about everything that had happened before them...Like a distant memory from a dream... It didn’t seem real anymore now. What mattered now was Harry...*Harry...*

“Harry?” She asked softly, pulling away to look into his curious eyes, finally daring to ask the question that had been plaguing her mind for several days now.

“What’s going to happen to us? I mean... Where do we go from here...?” She asked, her voice barely above the faintest whisper but Harry understood and to her surprise, instead, of reacting the way she had expected him to, he squeezed her hand, sighing.

She watched as about a dozen emotions flitted across Harry’s face, his eyes reflecting his uncertainty and nervousness yet looking so

determined and resolute that it brought a shiver down her spine from its intensity.

For a moment, he ceased to speak, pulling her to him again and resting his chin on top of her head in thought. Hermione closed her eyes in nervous anticipation of what she knew was to come, listening meekly to the strong beating of his heart in his chest.

She listened as the calming rhythm seemed to match hers perfectly... Two hearts beating together at the same time... As one... He was a part of her now... There would be no turning back from here... *No turning back now.*

Finally, Hermione felt him sigh heavily before he ran an affectionate hand through her brown locks. Hermione held her breath as Harry pulled away, allowing her to see his glowing green eyes looking fearful but at the same time, more sure of themselves than she had ever seen them before.

*"Everywhere...Hermione... We go everywhere from here... I—"*

"But Harry, you have to understand... I want a stable relationship. I don't want to hide like this anymore... So answer me now Harry... After tonight... Do you still want me...Or shall we end it like this? That way... At least we would have ended it on good terms..." Hermione interrupted, looking at him.

Harry lifted the side of his lips into an amused half-smile, half smirk, shaking his head at her in dismay. "You misunderstood me, Hermione... With regards to a relationship unhidden from everyone else... Well... I—"

"Harry, I know you don't want to tell them about us but—"

"I'm all up for it." He spoke on firmly, not giving her the chance to interrupt him once more from what he was going to say.

Hermione stopped midsentence, her jaw hanging open and her eyes as wide as saucers as Harry gave her a tender smile... A smile no one else would have ever seen but Hermione, his eyes sparkling with warmth and affection for her.

At Hermione's gaping expression, Harry's smile slowly transformed itself into an amused smirk, rolling his eyes as he laughed and pulled her to him again, catching her lips in a passionate searing kiss.

Hermione didn't blink as he pulled away, waiting for her reaction at his confirmation. "Y-you mean it Harry? You want to come out as a—a—"

"A couple?" Harry interrupted, laughing again. "Well...Not right away of course... I just need a couple of days to tell Draco and the others about it... I need to do this slowly...But I want to be with you... Can you give me the time?" He asked, unsure of himself but Hermione nodded, her eyes sparkling with affection and understanding.

"I admit, I'm not an expert when it comes to those clichéd, sappy, steady relationship couples like that but I'm willing to give it a shot... I love you Hermione..." He said, lifting a hand and letting it stroke her soft cheek.

Hermione finally snapped out of her stupor and smiled, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears as she placed her own hand over his and caressed it lovingly, directing it to her lips to give it a kiss.

"I don't care about what everyone would say about us anymore... I only have one question though Hermione... Do you want to be with me?" He asked sincerely, looking deep into her eyes as Hermione choked out a laugh despite her tears, shaking her head at his nonchalance.

"Harry, you stupid git!" Was all she said before she finally caught his lips again, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him closer to her, both of them building up the passion once more as Hermione's sheets slid off, forgotten...to the floor...

A slam in the room caused Draco to flinch awake and jerk his eyes open, the silver orbs searching around frantically. Instinctively, he felt his hands wrap around the body pressed up against him as he looked around, recalling the white interior of the hospital wing.



Beside him, AJ remained as cold as ice, her form unmoving and as lifeless as it had been before while Draco waited, with narrowed eyes, for the person to draw back the curtains around the bed.

He listened as heavy footsteps made their way towards them in fear, feeling his free hand reach for his wand on the bedside table, his muscles ready to spring into action at whoever it was heading for them.

Just as he was about to yell out the first spell that came into his mind, the curtains around them were pulled back impatiently and Draco found himself reflecting the glare on his best friend's face, his eyes narrowing in annoyance.

"What do you want, Potter?! Merlin, do you have to be so loud this early in the morning?!" He snapped irritably, untangling himself from AJ and pulling himself up to a sitting position.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he noticed their position, his eyes blazing deep into Draco's in question. "Just *what* were you doing sleeping in my sister's bed?!" He growled, emeralds flashing like thunder in anger.

Draco froze; feeling a hot blush creep into his face as Harry gently gathered his sister back under the covers, not taking blazing eyes off Draco's uncertain face as he pulled the blanket over AJ's form again.

He bent down to kiss his twin on the forehead for a moment before he snapped his attention back to Draco, his face a cold mask of demand and suspicion. "Draco, just because I gave you my blessing for my sister, I didn't exactly say you could sleep with her in the same bed while she's unconscious." He said slowly, his tone of voice icy.

Draco, if possible, blushed darker at Harry's words, refusing to meet the gaze of the emerald-eyed boy in front of him. "I—I know...Harry, I just wanted to make sure she's safe... That's why I stayed with her. It's not as if *you* were there to be the one to watch over her last night you know." He countered sarcastically, finally meeting his gaze with an accusing one of his own.

Harry held his glare for a long time, trying to mask the guilt and realization he felt in Draco's words. He looked away sharply, taking his twin's hand into his and squeezing it for comfort.

*AJ would understand... Me and Hermione.. She'd understand...* He thought, tightening his hand around his sister's as a light finally dawned in Draco's silver orbs and he sneered at Harry, taking his anger out on him in retaliation.

"Oh... I see now, Harry... You were with *her* last night, weren't you? You were with the mudblood... How *sweet*...The innocent Gryffindor with the evil-hearted Slytherin.. A fairy tale ending come true." He drawled poisonously, looking at Harry in disdain.

Harry looked away sharply again, not having the strength to face the spite and contempt he saw in Draco's eyes as he spoke those words. He wouldn't cave in... He had always been stronger than Draco... He'd show him that now.

"And what comes next? Huh, Harry? The prince admits his feelings for her in front of everyone and they ride off into the *fucking* sunset where they live happily ever after?!" He snapped again, sarcasm and disbelief dripping in his voice.

"Shut up, Draco! Just *shut up!!*" Harry finally exploded, lunging towards him and yanking him by the collar, lifting him up so that his feet barely brushed against the floor of the room.

Draco just sneered down at him, not at all intimidated by the fury hissing from Harry's eyes and expression, trying to break free from his tight grasp.

"Do you even *have* any more dignity in there, Potter?! Or is this what you have been reduced to?! Tell me now then, do you or do you not feel something for the mudblood?!" He hissed back, his eyes clouding over in derision.

Harry didn't answer, tightening his grip on Draco's collar just as Draco's sneer widened, his eyes glinting in satisfaction. "Just what *did* you do last night then, Harry? What did it feel like? Was it as you

expected the night you took the challenge to see how Granger was like in bed?!—”

“*Stop it, Draco!* Just stop it!” Harry interrupted, his eyes darkening with growing fury and yet, at the same time, his body beginning to weaken and tremble at Draco’s harsh words.

“Well, congratulations then Harry! You won our bet! You just bed Hermione-goody-two-shoes-Granger and made her fall for you! Now *that* is a glorifying victory and I must commend you for it! Bravo, Potter... Even *I* couldn’t have done what you just did.” Draco mocked on sarcastically, letting his famous Malfoy anger get the better of him.

He felt Harry’s form trembling as he mocked him further by clapping his hands noisily, filling the room with the harsh, sardonic sound as Harry’s hands finally gave and he let Draco go, covering his face with his hands.

“All us Slytherins will hail you, Potter! You’re the first one who managed to make it in bed with a Gryffindor and come out alive and kicking—”

Draco didn’t get to finish his sentence as Harry finally snapped and lunged at him again, his fist making direct contact with Draco’s eye, causing the other Slytherin to fall back onto the floor in pain, clutching his eye but too busy looking at Harry in shock to notice.

“Draco, *shut the fuck up!!* I love her, dammit! I love her and I don’t care what you think! I just don’t *care!!*” Harry screamed at him just as Draco stared up at him with one eye in surprise, disbelief and scandal.

“Wha-what did you say?!” He croaked out, barely registering the pain from his left eye as he spoke, carefully standing back up and staring at Harry as though he had grown an extra head.

Harry glared back at him defiantly before he sighed and sat down on the bed beside AJ, burying his face in his arms once again to avoid looking at the disgust he saw in Draco’s eyes.

“... The bet’s *off* Draco... I...I can’t go through with it... I...I *love* her...” He whispered, his voice so soft that Draco could barely hear

him but somehow, the wind carried his words over and Draco heard them whispered loudly against his ear.

“See Harry!! That was exactly what I was trying to tell you! You—”

“*Look*, Draco... I *know* I should never have allowed myself to fall for her but the thing is, I *did*...And there’s nothing I can do about that now...Because I love her too damn much already...I could never have controlled it...I got too involved and now I am.” He said firmly, interrupting Draco’s reaction.

“No you are *not*, Harry! Maybe this is just one of your phases... I mean, sooner or later, you’ll tire of the mudblood anyway right—”

Draco stopped abruptly in midsentence when Harry had stood up and had grabbed him by the collar again, yanking his face towards him so that they were only inches apart.

“Haven’t you been listening, dammit?! She is different than the others... I *love* her, Draco. I *love* her... How hard is that for you to understand?! I would have expected that *you* of all people, would understand how it feels to love someone...” He hissed, gesturing towards AJ on the bed.

Draco flushed in anger as he followed Harry’s gaze to the raven-haired girl on the bed, his uninjured eye softening visibly as he watched her sleeping form breathing peacefully.

“Y—You’d give a—anything... *Anything* to be with her...To hold her in your arms... To have her as your own...” He whispered softly, never taking his eye off AJ as Harry’s hand shook weakly in agreement.

“... Yes...” He whispered, letting Draco go and collapsing back on the bed, trying to gather himself once again.

Draco sat down on the chair beside the bed for a long moment in silence, avoiding his gaze as he winced in pain, finally becoming aware of the large bruise growing around his eye.

“Bloody hell... You pack a mean punch, Potter...” He kidded weakly, looking up to see Harry, despite his frustration, choke out a weak laugh, the faint sound as desperate and confused as he looked.

Draco sighed and sat down on the bed beside Harry, keeping his eyes focused intently on his best friend’s facial features. “....Tell me then...” He spoke; making sure his voice was calm and devoid of any emotion whatsoever.

Harry let out the breath of air that he had been holding and closed his eyes again, his form tense and rigid. “...I...I don’t know, Draco... It may have started out as a joke at first...It *may* have been all been about pride and challenge but...The thing is, it’s *not* anymore.” He began.

Draco didn’t react, watching Harry silently as he sighed again and covered his face with his hands, his breathing growing erratic.

“All that doesn’t matter to me anymore... All that matters is I...I do love her now... And as hard as it might be for you to accept it, it’s the damn truth.” He finished, finally removing his hands and looking up to meet Draco’s eyes calmly with his own in challenge.

Draco stared at him for a long time, unblinking and unrelenting while a dozen emotions flittered rapidly across his face. From disbelief to disgust...To anger and resentment...But strangely, *respect* and *honor* although Harry couldn’t be too sure.

Finally, after what seemed to Harry years of waiting for a response, Draco allowed the corner of his lips to lift into a smirk, shaking his head ruefully. “You really amaze me, Harry... You love acquiring the forbidden... It never ceases to earn my respect in one way or another...” Draco said, looking at Harry in amusement.

Just as Harry was about to respond, Draco’s face transformed back into a snobby sneer and he glared at Harry in anger. “*But...* You...You lied to me, Harry... And no matter what, you still shattered my trust... You’re a Slytherin and you fell for a *Gryffindor*—”

“So just what are you trying to say, Draco? That you’re going to put an end to this? You’re going to stop me?” Harry interrupted coldly,

finally standing up and towering over Draco's sitting form in intimidation.

Draco didn't respond right away but he stood up to his full height as well, meeting Harry's eyes easily with his own and holding his ground where he stood.

"No... I will not sink myself to that level, Harry... I won't stop you... I respect you too much not only as my best friend but almost like a brother so I don't want to try and run your life. That's *your* decision..." He said slowly, nodding while Harry visibly relaxed but he kept his eyes intently on Draco.

"However... Think about it Harry... It's only a matter of time now... Even though I can respect your choice, do you really think everyone else is going to be all cozy with you and *Granger*?! Such a delusional relationship like yours is not meant to last forever..." Draco told him quietly.

Harry's jaw clenched in anger, his eyes darkening and growing cloudy as he pondered Draco's stinging words. "You're wrong." He said firmly although his own heart seemed to doubt his words.

"You live in different worlds, Harry... Your lives are too far apart from the other. How would she fit in your circle of friends? How would *you* fit in *her* circle of friends? How do you think the school will react? Nearly everyone would be against it..." Draco continued, watching him closely.

"I know that already, Draco." Harry replied evenly, trying not to take his words in too deep as he turned away.

"Look at yourselves Harry... It's like every week you and Granger get into a *misunderstanding* don't you? I can tell... You wanna know why? It's because you don't belong with her, Harry... You're not meant to be that type or to experience that kind of relationship—"

"Please stop it Draco..." Harry whispered weakly, feeling his chest clenching painfully and his heart dropping onto the floor.

"You're not meant for roses and sweets and double dates... You are a *Slytherin*, Harry... I hope you haven't forgotten the world you belong in." Draco said in defeat, almost sadly as he took in his own words.

"How sure are you that what you feel for each other...is going to last? Is it worth giving *everything* up?" He finished, whispering softly but the words rang loud and clear in Harry's ears.

*How sure are you that what you feel for each other...is going to last?* Harry kept his back to Draco as he wrenched his eyes shut, trying to block out the harsh words that kept coming out of his own best friend's mouth at him.

But another voice was speaking in his head and he leaned against the wall on the far side of the room, oblivious to Draco's concerned voice as he recognized Hermione's voice...

*"You hurt me... Harry... You really hurt me..."*

*"I know..."*

*"And I don't think I can handle that kind of pain again... I've already endured so much these past months because of you... I can't even be certain of how much tears you've cost me already... Or if I can handle being with you again..."*

*"In fact... I'm not so sure of anything else anymore, Harry... My mind and my heart is a complete blank thanks to you... You've pushed to me to the very brink of even hating myself... Everything is just so - fucked-up, Harry..."*

*"But I am sure of one thing, Harry... Just one thing..."*

*"And it's the fact that... It's the fact that I..."*

*"It's the fact that I love you, Harry..."*

*I love you too Hermione... You don't know how much...* Harry finally realized once more, feeling his heart strengthening with life as he

wrenched his eyes open, glaring at Draco with such intensity that it made the blonde Slytherin step back in surprise.

Instinctively, he felt his lips forming into the familiar patterns of his well-known sneer as he stepped up to Draco, raising his eyebrow at his best friend's uneasiness.

"I never said I was sure of anything, Draco... And frankly, I couldn't give a bloody damn what happens from now or what everyone is going to think... Hell, I don't even care if we last as long as we'd want to..." Harry stated firmly, meeting his gaze.

"The fact is...I've had enough of running away from the truth... I won't be a coward anymore...*like you*..." He said snidely, feeling a surge of triumph when Draco's face fell, his confidence faltering at the insult.

"Wha—What do you mean by that? Harry—"

"*Look*... I may not know all the details of what happened... But I know *one* thing, Draco. *Something* went wrong that night of the Yule Ball... Something *you* screwed up between you and my sister because otherwise, she would have been with *you* the entire night wouldn't she?" Harry accused, narrowing his eyes at him.

Draco's eyes widened in alarm, glaring at Harry in utmost fury. "I did *not* screw anything up, Harry! You don't know anything, she—"

"All I know is... You must have cowered away, Malfoy... Because whatever happens, if you really *did* love her...You would have fought for her." Harry said flatly, looking at him in resentment.

"I *know* that, already, dammit! Merlin, Potter, do you have to keep on telling me that?! How many times must I have my mistake shoved into my face?!" Draco blurted out, whipping around and ramming his fist into the wall.

Harry didn't even flinch, watching as Draco weakened and slowly began sliding down against the wall until he sat in a fetal position on the floor, burying his face in his arms.



"You're a coward, Draco... Nothing but a coward... It's pathetic... Well if you want to remain that way fine but I won't anymore. I'm doing what *I* want." Harry said, his tone of voice sure and final as he spoke.

Draco didn't lift his head up but his form tensed at Harry's voice and his hands clenched themselves slowly into fists of rage. "How do you know... It wasn't your indecisive twin's fault then...?" He asked bitterly in a hoarse whisper, his voice dripping with anger and sarcasm.

"Because... It *couldn't* have been her fault, Draco... I spoke to her right before she came to you... I know what she felt that very moment. She *told* me." Harry said, surprising Draco at the sudden gentleness in his voice.

"Just *what* are you trying to say, Harry?" He asked, finally lifting his head and looking up at Harry as the other Slytherin slowly traveled the length of the room to stand in front of him, towering over him.

"I'm saying Draco... It can't have been her fault...Because...She loves *you*."

Draco's eyes widened in denial, glaring up at him in demand but Harry merely stared back, not giving anything away from his facial expression until he offered a hand to help him up.

Draco stared at the hand for a long moment, his face paling and his eyes looking dazed and unfocused as he spoke once more.

"But...She—I thought... I thought she—"

"She's *always* loved you, Draco. I just never told you because I didn't want you to take her from me right away... She may have pretended otherwise but it was obvious... Even *I* knew it ever since though *she* never realized it. She loves...And has *always* loved...Only *you*." Harry finished, managing the strength to give him a weak smile.

Draco only stared back, using a shaky hand to grasp Harry's own hand and pull himself up, nearly falling over again if it hadn't been for Harry's support. *Stupid...Stupid... Stupid!! Malfoy, you stupid idiot!*

He thought, cursing himself inwardly as Harry let his hand go, moving away from him.

Silently, he strode over to the bed and gave his twin another kiss on the forehead before he headed for the door, leaving Draco standing there in the room like a frozen statue of shock and realization.

Just as he was about to exit the door however, Harry turned around once more and looked at the regretful, disbelieving expression on Draco's face, summoning up the nerve to speak for the final time.

"For the record Draco... If I could be honest...I don't know why my sister chose *you*...I don't know why she fell in love with *you*...And frankly, I don't know why you chose *her* either. But then again, I remember being told that you can't really choose the person you love now can you?" He pointed out quietly.

Draco didn't blink, keeping his gaze trained onto the white walls as Harry sighed, shaking his head at the blonde's stubbornness.

"I just hoped... Draco...That *you* of all people, would understand why I'm doing this." He said once more, giving him one last look before he finally turned and left the room, his black robe doing the trademark swish behind him.

Draco barely saw him leave, finally letting his silver eyes trail over to the sleeping figure on the bed, filling up with the pain he had been trying to hold back in Harry's presence.

*Harry's right... You blew it Malfoy... Coward...*

*Oh yes, Harry sweetie... I understand you 'perfectly'...*

Parvati Patil allowed a sadistic smile to form on her lips as she quickly stepped away from where she had been pressing her ear against the door and concealed herself in the shadows yet just as Harry stepped out of the hospital wing.

She held her breath, her heart pounding nervously in her chest as the handsome Slytherin looked around in suspicion for a brief moment

before smirking at himself and walking off, shutting the door behind him.

Then, with a smirk that matched Harry's, she leaned back against the wall and pondered exactly on the words she had just heard Harry and Draco exchange through the door...

*I'm sure Hermione will get a kick out of this...* She thought, sneering wider as she slowly made her way down the corridor Harry had went, her footsteps calm and steady in the quiet hallway.

She had heard it... She had heard *everything*... The minute she had seen the way Harry was heading towards the hospital wing, she had followed him in the shadows, sensing something was up.

She couldn't help herself...She had been waiting for a chance like this ever since what had happened between her and the conniving Slytherin... She had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to make him pay for what he's done...

*I hate you, Harry... I hate you and I love you and I hate myself for it...I'm going to make sure you and Granger get what you both deserve...* She thought hatefully, feeling her eyes well up in angry tears.

*I will make you feel pain, Harry... I will make known to you the pain you made me suffer...I want you to experience the kind of pain and humiliation you gave me. You are going down...* She thought, her eyes glinting maliciously.

*I'll make you 'both' pay.. You 'and' your little girlfriend...*She added, smiling smugly to herself in satisfaction as she stopped abruptly in the middle of the corridor, spinning around sharply.

"I believe it's been a long time since I've talked to my Bulgarian friend..." She murmured to herself in the silent corridor, giggling at the plan she had in mind as she headed off towards the Durmstrang ship, the smile never wavering from her face.

“Hey Mione! Since when did you receive so much fan mail?” Seamus piped up, biting into an apple at the breakfast table the next day as Hermione opened letter after letter in front of him in exasperation.

“Oh you git! These aren’t fan mail, they’re all hate letters because of that Skeeter woman’s article about me!” She snapped irritably, crumpling up one letter and reaching for the next.

“They’re all the same! *‘You are a wicked girl. Harry Potter deserves better, go back to where you came from’, ‘Harry Potter can do better without you’, ‘You deserve to be boiled in frog spawn’* oh for Merlin’s sake!” She cried out, tossing the letters away in annoyance.

“Those people can’t actually believe that *you’re* Potter’s girlfriend now can they?” Ron asked incredulously, causing Hermione to snap her attention to him in anger.

“What do you by *that*, Ron?!” She demanded, narrowing her eyes at him while Ron gave her a sheepish smile, shrugging before he took a long swig of his pumpkin juice.

“Because it’s sort of ridiculous! I would have expected them to make up a rumor about Patil or Parkinson with Potter or something... Just imagining that article is enough to make me sick actually.” Ron pointed out, snorting.

“Hey, have any of you guys seen Parvati?” Lavender suddenly asked, her eyes searching the Great Hall for the girl in suspicion.

“She’s probably still up in the dorms still moping or something...I don’t even know why you were friends with—”

Seamus stopped in midsentence, his eyes widening and his face twisting in anger while the other Gryffindors around him did the same, freezing whatever it was they were doing to glare at the two boys who had entered the hall.

“What? What’s the matt—” Hermione looked up and instantly, she saw what the sudden silence in the entire Great Hall was all about.

She watched as Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy entered the Great Hall silently, well known smirks plastered onto their debonair faces and feet barely making a sound on the floor in their elegant strides towards their table.

She hid a smile to see that for the first time in weeks, Harry looked much more like himself in terms of his appearance. His hair had been tamed and gelled into enticing spikes on his head while his eyes were glowing bright green though it seemed only *she* knew the reason behind that.

The perfect picture of the two most sought-after boys in the school...Everyone in the Great Hall had become silent and was staring openly at them, the entire room tense and uneasy as they entered.

Both Slytherins looked both unafraid and aggravated by the awkward attention on them as they kept their gazes up and met the looks of those who were staring but it seemed whenever they managed to catch a glance every now and then, the student would look away.

Hermione managed to look up and catch Harry's eye for a split second, almost choking on her food when she saw Harry's eyes sparkling in mirth before he winked publicly at her, teasingly blowing a kiss in her direction.

Draco looked at Harry in disgust, shaking his head and walking to the Slytherin table in resentment but Harry was unrelenting, keeping a smirk firmly in place as he promptly made his way to the Gryffindors.

"Is he delusional?! He's coming on to you, Hermione! He's mocking you!" Ron blurted out suspiciously, looking incredibly spooked out as he looked at the oncoming Slytherin as though he had three heads.

"What is that crazy git planning, coming near us?!" Seamus asked, looking nervous as everyone's eyes in the Great Hall watched Harry's every movement towards them.

Then, with a lopsided grin, Harry intentionally knocked one of the goblets on the table, causing it to spill all over the boy who was sitting right beside Hermione—Neville. "Whoops..." Harry said sarcastically,

sneering as Neville shot up, shocked by the blast of cold and cowered away from him, eyes wide in intimidation.

“Move...Longbottom and I might think twice about punching you.” Harry said softly, giving Neville a relaxed smile but the glint in his eye told Neville that he was dead serious, causing the Gryffindor to move away instantly.

Hermione glared at him, trying to send some private message of disapproval at what he had done to Neville but whether he read it or not, he brushed it off, smirking at a gaping Ron and Seamus as he rested one foot on the seat Neville had just vacated.

“Looking delectable today, Granger...I rather enjoyed our little session last night...” He teased, his eyes sparkling with humor and hidden affection while Hermione blushed but hid another smile, shaking her head.

Ignoring her housemates’ gasps, she forced herself to direct a glare at him in response. “You wish... Keep dreaming Potter...” She retorted, looking up to see the amusement in his eyes

Hermione stifled a laugh yet again, smirking as Harry faked a “shot-through-the-heart” look, giving her a meaningful look. “Really now Granger? Why, I didn’t hear you complaining last night...” He quipped again, biting his tongue to hold back his hysterics as he heard Ron choking on his pumpkin juice behind them.

Hermione glared at him, both annoyed and scandalized at his bold words. “I said...*Keep dreaming*, Potter... Because someday, it just might come true.”

Harry allowed a smile at her and she couldn’t help but feel her knees tremble under the table, her face darkening with embarrassment. “Oh I will, Granger... I will...” He winked again for the last time before he turned and strode back to his table in one suave movement, leaving Ron and Seamus gaping at Hermione like idiots.

In spite of herself, she sighed, discouraged by the glares and spiteful stares she was now receiving from the other tables as the Great Hall resumed its normal activity.

*It's only a matter of time now... You won't have to hide anymore... Everyone will know soon enough...* She reminded herself, taking a deep breath for reassurance before she launched into another one of her explanations to the two Gryffindors in front of her.

Just as Seamus was going to react, however, another envelope landed right on Hermione's lap and without hesitating, she opened it again, almost certain it was one of those hate letters.

Unfortunately for her, the letter was accompanied with something else...A little present from another fan of Harry's..."Undiluted bubotuber pus!" Neville exclaimed as yellowish-green petrol-like liquid began to spill out onto Hermione's slender hands, immediately erupting into large yellow boils.

"Ow...Damn..." Hermione cursed under her breath, immediately dropping the letter aside and standing up, clutching her swelling hands in pain.

From across the room, she could see that Harry was looking at her in concern from where he sat, barely hearing the lively conversation of his housemates around him. Hermione shook her head and reassured him with a small smile before she turned back to Ron, trying hard not to let the other girls, who were watching Hermione intently, notice what had happened.

"Ron, tell Hagrid I'm going to the hospital wing okay? I have to cure this before it becomes too serious..." She said, biting back her pain again as Ron nodded in response.

Smiling gratefully, she hastily exited the hall just as Ron picked up the letter she had dropped on the table, reading it out loud to himself.

*"Merlin... Seamus check this out! I've read about how you're trying to play both Harry Potter 'and' Viktor Krum and I think it's disgusting! Watch yourself, I'm going to be sending you a curse as soon as I find a big enough envelope!"* Ron said, laughing.

"It's not funny, Ron... Hermione should really start watching out for herself..." Lavender reasoned, shaking her head as she rifled through the letters Hermione had left behind.

“Yeah... Poor Hermione, getting involved in all this.” Ron agreed, shaking his head as Seamus nudged his elbow sharply, gesturing across the room.

“It’s all Potter’s fault anyway. Getting here involved in all this...The stupid git has got something up his sleeve, I’m telling you...” He said, looking at Harry suspiciously who was too busy arguing with Draco to notice.

Lavender rolled her eyes, looking annoyed at the boys’ nonchalance. “Ooh.. I’m sure, Seamus, I’m sure. As of this very moment, those two are formulating a plan to take over all of England and they’re arguing about their new aliases...” She said sarcastically, causing the other Gryffindors around them to laugh heartily.

Ron grinned and Seamus blushed in response, glaring at Lavender in indignation. “Hey! It’s not funny, Lavender! For all we know, they could be trying to manufacture *hair gel* to brainwash all wizards and witches alike everywhere!” He kidded, earning another round of laughter from Ron.

Lavender giggled, gesturing to the Slytherin duo in front of them. “Hey, you have to admit, hair gel looks pretty good on them anyway. Why don’t you guys try wearing some?” She teased, nudging Ron, causing the redhead to glare at her.

“I think I look fine enough, thanks.” He replied stiffly as Lavender smiled at him, shaking her head at his irritation.

He didn’t understand what had happened between them actually... *Something* had been growing between him and Lavender ever since those past few days before the Yule Ball. They had gotten to know each other more than he would have ever expected and Ron had sensed that his feelings for the other Gryffindor had somewhat risen until it was hovering between the boundary of friendship and...something else...

He didn’t want to think about it... He couldn’t even understand himself. The night of the Yule Ball...He had wanted AJ Potter... He had stared at her the entire night and he knew that he wanted her...



Set aside their past animosity and hatred, she was everything he had ever wanted in a girl...Beautiful, smart, determined and strong-willed...A girl who wasn't about to let a guy dominate over her...A girl who fought back.

Or at least...He *thought* she was everything he had ever wanted in girl...Lavender was the complete opposite of AJ...AJ was never delicate, Ron knew *that* much even though Potter and Malfoy liked to protect her so damn much, the girl couldn't have broken a fingernail without those two gits fussing over her.

Lavender was submissive...Delicate and much weaker in terms of inner strength than his former Slytherin enemy was...That was somehow the reason why he became more attached to her... He felt the need to be at her side to protect her always. To take care of her...AJ, if anything, can take of herself.

*Oh but I definitely have my regrets...I admit that...* He thought, shaking his head as he imagined how beautiful the girl had looked while he danced with her that night in the Ball.

If he could have decided, he would have given anything to have chosen AJ to be his girlfriend...*Anything...* But unfortunately... *That's not for me to decide.* Ron thought, shrugging and turning to look at Lavender again.

That night...At the Yule Ball... It was kind of strange that AJ had admitted her feelings for him just like that because frankly, he hadn't felt anything at all in her words... Or she hadn't felt any emotion directed at him whatsoever when she had said them. They just felt empty.

And what surprised him even more was that instead of feeling all happy and giddy that AJ had said those words, he had felt nothing. It wasn't as he had expected the feeling of someone "*loving*" him to be...

*Seamus was wrong...A relationship 'is' about love. It can't survive on attraction alone...And I'd be worse than both Potter 'and' Malfoy if I date AJ only for her looks...*Ron thought solemnly, shaking his head. *Yeah...Maybe, we could have had something special... Me and*

*Potter...But right now, I think it's just not going to work...I just need to tell the girl herself when she wakes up...* He concluded, nodding to himself in affirmation.

It had been different feeling altogether with Lavender though... That night, she had asked him to walk with her along the Hogwarts gardens because she wanted to talk to him... Still thinking about the raven-haired Slytherin, he reluctantly agreed.

He had never expected Lavender to come out with her feelings like that...It had been much more sincere and genuine than AJ's had been...And *this* time, Ron had felt so much emotion, adoration and affection within her words that he had found missing in AJ's.

And before he knew what was happening, he was kissing her and she was kissing him back and that kiss alone proved much more passionate and meaningful than any other kiss he had ever experienced.

It was much more intense and absorbing that he barely understood what or why he felt that way for Lavender at all since he supposedly liked AJ but it was that same night that he finally realized just who he wanted...And it wasn't AJ...

*I just wish I can stop beating myself up about it...* He thought, sighing as he got up with the other Gryffindors and headed outside the castle for their Care of Magical Creatures lesson with Hagrid, the Slytherins following at a distance behind them.

*And I just wish Malfoy will stop glaring at me like it was my fault or something...* Ron added darkly, seeing the poisonous, hateful glare Malfoy was throwing his direction from where he was with his Slytherin friends.

They all saw Hagrid waiting outside his hut for them in front of a couple of open crates, a large beaming grin on his face. Ron nervously followed the other Gryffindors ahead of him until he finally caught sight of the large, fluffy black creatures inside.

His eyes widened in curiosity when he saw that the creatures, whatever they were, had long snouts and flat spades for feet, looking up at them and looking adorably confused at all the attention.

“Hey Weasley!”

Ron spun around at the voice, finding himself face to face with Potter himself, his whole crew of Slytherins behind him. “What do you want, Potter?” He asked coldly, mustering up a glare as Potter mockingly held up his hands in amusement, a smirk elegantly placed on his proud features.

“Touchy, touchy, Weasley... I was only going to ask... Where’s Granger off to?” He asked, trying his best to look uninterested in the answer while Ron narrowed his eyes suspiciously, looking spooked out.

“That’s none of your business, Potter. Since when did *you* care anyway?” He replied flatly, giving him a wry smile as Harry took the turn this time to return the glare, annoyed at his smug expression.

“Why Weasley, I would have thought *you* of all people would have read about Granger and me...” He replied tauntingly, sneering at him coldly again before walking away, Malfoy glaring at Potter as he followed.

“Settle down, settle down yeh two... Anyway... They’re adorable little critters aren’t they? *Niffles*...” Hagrid began, gesturing for all of them to gather around him. Harry gave Hagrid a smile and joined him while Draco kept at a farther distance, looking in an extremely bad mood and in disarray as he glared at Hagrid in annoyance.

“Yeh find em in mines, mostly... They have a liking fer sparkly stuff.. Whoops, there yeh go Ms. Parkinson.” He said, wincing as a niffle shot up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson’s watch off her wrist, causing the girl to shriek and cower behind Harry in fear.

Harry growled and shoved her away, annoyed at her pettiness while Hagrid carried on, giving them a cheery smile once again. “They’re useful little detectors. Thought we’d have some fun with em today. Look over there.” He pointed to a large area of freshly upturned earth

to their right, causing some of the Slytherin girls to wrinkle their noses in disdain.

"I buried some gold coins there. I've got a prize fer the one who picks the niffler who digs out the most coins. Now take off all yer valuables and pick a niffler...Set em loose right there." Hagrid indicated, nodding to them.

Harry obliged by taking off his silver watch, earring and pendant, stuffing it into his pocket before he bent over and chose a niffler, chuckling in spite of himself when it began sniffing his ear.

Behind him, Draco had just removed his earring and Fierros, giving Harry a weak smile as he bent down and selected a nearby niffler as well, wincing in disdain when the niffler began sniffing at him.

"You know... AJ would regret missing *this* lesson... She loves animals like these..." Draco said, wincing again when the niffler began sniffing at his neck, trying to ease the niffer away from him.

Harry smiled in agreement at him before he set his niffler loose, holding back a grin as he watched the creature dive into the fresh patch of earth over and over again before running back to him, spitting the gold coins into his hand.

Beside him, he heard Draco's disgusted exclamation when his niffler had spit the gold coins into his hand before diving back into the earth with the others, eager to get more gold.

Despite everything though, Ron's niffler seemed to be the most efficient and had soon filled the Gryffindor's lap with coins while Crabbe and Goyle, who were right beside Harry and Draco, opted rather to hastily stuff the coins in their pockets.

"By the way Ron, where's Hermione? I noticed one niffler is still left in the crate." Hagrid said, causing Harry's ear to perk up and look at them secretly, listening for Ron's answer.

"She's in the hospital wing, Hagrid...Had to get some medication. I'll tell you about it later." Ron replied, glaring pointedly at Harry, causing

the Slytherin to smirk in response and look away, getting the information he needed.

*Medication? For what?* He thought, feeling a surge of worry rush through him but just as he was about to press Weasley further about it, he spoke up again, looking at the castle.

"Here she comes now, Hagrid." Ron said, waving as Hermione strode towards them slowly, her hand bandaged heavily as she winced in pain.

"Blimey, Hermione! What happened to yer hands?" He asked, looking at her in concern while Hermione gave him a solemn grin, shaking her head to herself.

*"Fan mail."* Unfortunately for me, the witches who read Witch weekly have a liking to Harry Potter." She said wryly, sighing while Hagrid patted her on the shoulder, looking at her knowingly.

"Don't worry Hermione. I get letters like that all the time after *my* article from Rita Skeeter. Mostly about me bein a monster and my mother killin innocent people." Hagrid told her ruefully.

"They're despicable..." Hermione agreed in disgust, glowering to herself as she rubbed her hands again, looking up to see the apologetic look in Harry's eyes that indicated that the Slytherin had been listening.

"Yeah... They're just nutters, Hermione. Just chuck em into the fire when yeh receive em letters.. They're not worth yer time." Hagrid said, patting her on the shoulder again before he finally signaled the end of class, Ron's niffler being the most successful among the rest.

Hermione began following the other Gryffindors back towards the castle, avoiding the stares the gossip-hungry Slytherin girls were throwing at her behind them as Ron and Seamus filled her in on what she had just missed.

"That was a really cool lesson though, Mione. Nifflers are pretty interesting than most of the other creatures we've taken up so far." Seamus said just as they entered the Hogwarts castle.

Hermione was about to respond but she stopped abruptly when she saw a dainty foot step right in front of her path, looking all too familiar as she let her eyes narrow into slits.

Slowly, ignoring Ron and Seamus' argument, she let her eyes trail up the foot of the person in front of her and found herself glaring at the sickeningly sweet smile of the person she had least wanted to see.

Slowly, the girl's lips curved into a horrid sneer, causing a tremor of anxiety to rise up in Hermione's gut.

"Parvati..."

**A/NNot** my best chapter but it was the best I could do at the moment so... Oh, thanks to all those who reviewed! Your suggestions and ideas helped out a lot. I think I have an idea how I'm going to twist up OotP but you never know...

**THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO SENT ME AN EMAIL TELLIN ME TO GET MY LAZY ARSE UP AND CONTINUE WRITING!** THAT helped a lot! I can't mention all of you because frankly, that would take forever so just thank you so much! You know who you all are! Well, till then, ciao!! Don't forget to **REVIEW! REVIEW! REVIEW! REVIEW! REVIEW!**

## Chapter 28- A New Dream

“Parvati...”

Parvati batted her eyelashes innocently in response, smiling as Hermione’s wary eyes swept over her form in suspicion, her own body tense and uncomfortable. “What do you want, Patil?” Hermione asked, sighing heavily while Ron and Seamus stared at the two of them curiously, obviously having no idea as to what was going on.

Parvati just smiled wider, ignoring the cold tone in the other girl’s voice as she stepped forward and slung her arm around Hermione’s shoulders, squeezing her in a mock-friendly gesture.

“Oh nothing, Hermione... I just couldn’t help noticing how absolutely glowing you look today. No doubt, it’s because of your blooming love life now, isn’t it?” She teased, giggling at Hermione’s utterly bewildered expression.

“Um... I’m not so sure I get what you’re saying, Parvati.” She said slowly, exchanging confused glances with Ron over Parvati’s shoulder but the redhead just shrugged in response.

“Oh come now, Hermione. I think we both know now that the best girl won here... And just to show that I don’t have any hard feelings, I’d like to say...*congratulations*. You won.” She said, releasing Hermione and offering a hand to the brunette.

Hermione eyed the hand carefully, unsure of the hidden meaning behind Parvati’s words. She had been played by this girl’s acting before... She won’t be the fool again. Something in her told her not to trust the other girl so willingly this time...She just wasn’t so sure what that was.

It seemed at that moment, Parvati’s eye had twitched in annoyance but she couldn’t be too sure as she slowly let her hand down and looked at Hermione carefully, her eyes devoid of any emotion.

“I’m not trying to do anything, Hermione. All I’m asking for now is your forgiveness. I really hope to put all the animosity in the past behind us.” She said, an almost sad look in her eye as she spoke the words.

Hermione bit her lip, looking at the confused expressions of her two best friends beside her. Ron was looking back and forth between the two of them while Seamus was just scratching his head, his eyes glazed over in uncertainty.

“Um...Well, I’m sorry, Parvati, I guess I um—”

*“Please, Hermione... I really want to forget everything that’s happened behind us... I want to be friends again. I don’t really want our friendship to end all because of one boy.”* She drawled sweetly, flashing Hermione a sugary sweet smile.

Hermione forced herself to return the smile, albeit reluctantly as she and Parvati rounded the corner to the Transfigurations classroom, Ron and Seamus following behind them at a close distance.

“Er... I agree Parvati. Um... But, what exactly do you mean one boy?” Hermione asked, fusing her eyebrows together as Parvati’s eyes flashed in annoyance but she held it back, answering Hermione with a high-pitched giggle.

“Oh don’t play games, Herm. I know all about...you... And don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.” Parvati quipped, winking knowingly at her while Hermione nodded uncertainly in response, unsure of how she was going to react.

Both girls remained quiet as they walked to their Transfigurations classroom, Hermione with an utterly confused look on her face and Parvati with a sneer on hers, an evil glint in her eye that shone every now and then, making the other girl nervous.

Just as they were about to turn and walk into the classroom, Parvati reached out and stopped Hermione from entering, turning the girl around so that they were face to face. Hermione stiffened but nodded for Ron and Seamus to walk on ahead, knowing full well that whatever the other girl had to say would probably be private.

“Look... It’s obvious you still don’t trust me. And I can understand why you feel that way... But I’ll tell you this, don’t worry. I’ve realized that I could never win over you now, Hermione. From now on, Harry is



yours. I've stopped my relentless pursuit of him. I can see he likes *you*." She said, giving Hermione what she hoped was a sincere smile.

Hermione, despite her uneasy feeling, smiled back, nodding and accepting the girl's words. "I... Thank you, Parvati... I'm really glad that we're not going to let this one thing destroy the good friendship we've had going." She managed to say, carefully considering her words.

Parvati smiled wider, an unseen gleam in her eye that forewarned something she was definitely up to. Hermione however, didn't seem to notice. "Indeed... And I'd just like to say...*sorry*. I want to apologize to both you and Harry for all the crap I've been putting you two through lately. I guess I was just insanely jealous..." She admitted, giving her a sheepish smile.

Hermione finally caved in and offered a genuine grin, laughing warmly in response. "Don't worry about it, Parvati! It's nothing really... If anything, I want to thank you. You've made us both realize how much we care for each other..." She said, blushing.

Parvati's left eye twitched but she hid it and forced another laugh, nodding at the other girl's words.

"Thank you Hermione. I don't deserve it but thank you for understanding my actions these past few days. If only I could go back and change everything but I can't... Although... I do have one favor to ask you and Harry. That is... If you don't mind of course." She said slowly, an almost modest look in her eyes.

Just as she had predicted, Hermione gave in right away, shaking her head and offering her a warm smile of agreement. "Of course not, Parv.. What is it?"

Parvati turned away to hide the sinister grin that was threatening to burst out of her. "Well... I wanted to formally apologize to both you *and* Harry at the same time tomorrow. If it's not too much trouble, I was hoping if you and Harry could meet me tomorrow...Around lunchtime by the lake? You're the only person who could convince him to come..." She reasoned slowly.

Hermione bit her lip, uncertain about the idea. She wasn't so sure if Harry would agree with her to come just like that... "Well... Uh...I'll uh—"

"*Please* Hermione? I'm begging you... It's the only way I'll ever be able to live with myself. Otherwise, all those things that I've done to both of you will live in my conscience forever and will slowly eat me alive! I have to get this off my chest...*Please??*" She begged, looking at Hermione with wide, pleading eyes.

Hermione sighed, shrugging and giving Parvati a rueful grin in response. "Okay. I'll *try*, Parvati... But I'm telling you now... I can't guarantee that Harry will come. You know how stubborn that stupid git is..." She said, rolling her eyes in frustration.

Parvati giggled, linking her arms with Hermione's and pulling her into the slowly filling Transfigurations classroom. "Do I know... I swear, at times I'd think he wouldn't try to save his own life if someone ordered him to just to prove that he doesn't follow anyone else around." She kidded, earning a light laugh from Hermione.

*Yeah... Sounds like my Harry alright...* She agreed silently, blushing at the possessiveness she felt in her own thoughts.

"Okay, I'll figure it out somehow but we'll both meet you there even if it means I have to drag him there kicking and screaming." Hermione finally agreed just as she and Parvati chose seats at the far end of the classroom.

Parvati faked a laugh and finally turned to her books, smirking to herself as Hermione began organizing her stuff neatly on her table. *For the smartest girl in the year, Granger is sure one easy idiot to manipulate... Wonder what Harry ever saw in such an innocent twit like her...* She thought in amusement.

She turned to look at the other girl again and was surprised when she caught sight of something on her just as Hermione was tucking a strand of long brown hair behind her ear. "Hermione.... What is...What is that on your neck? Is that...Is that a...a *hickey??*"

Hermione blinked and looked down before instantly blushing dark red and hastily moving her robe collar to hide the dark purple bruise. "Uh... No! It's um... I...I just bruise easily... It's nothing..." She answered hastily, purposely avoiding the other girl's eyes.

Parvati narrowed her eyes at her in undeniable rage and hatred but Hermione was too busy admiring the lines on the floor to notice, her face still a considerable dark shade of red as she did. Both girls waited until Prof. McGonagall had finally walked into the room before checking Parvati watch, a slow sneer forming on her flawlessly made-up face as she did so.

*It won't be long now...If I can't have him...Then no one else can... Mr. Harry James Potter, you are going down... I will you regret for ever daring to hurt me like that...* She thought bitterly as her eyes grew moist with frustrated tears.

Before anyone could notice, she angrily wiped them away and slammed her book onto the table, more than eager to begin this class and get it over with.

*"Constant Vigilance!* Always be alert... No one is going to tell you he's going to cast an unforgivable curse! *Constant Vigilance!"*

Harry tried very hard not to punch his best friend right in the gut as Draco carried on and on with his cheap impersonation of Prof. Moody, earning both popular boys curious glances from the other students in the hallway.

"Can you believe that guy?! Dumbledork has finally gone mad this time... Enlisting that crackpot as a teacher. Just wait till I tell my father about this..." Draco complained loudly, a hateful sneer on his face as they rounded the corner.

Harry couldn't help but smirk at the blonde in response as he eyed the severely pissed-off look on Draco's normally calm and collected face. "You're only pissed off at him because he made you bounce up and down like a ferret with the Imperius curse." He scoffed, sniggering.

Draco flushed dark red at the memory and smacked Harry right on the shoulder, causing the raven-haired Slytherin to wince in surprise. "Shut up, Harry! It's not funny! He's a poor excuse for a teacher! Casting an Unforgivable spell on fourth year students... He's a lunatic!" He snapped, a scowl on his face.

"Didn't bother me..." Harry drawled arrogantly, earning him another glare from Draco in response.

They had just finished off with DADA that morning and it seemed that all Draco wanted to do was make cheap, flaky imitations of Prof. Moody in retaliation for the embarrassment the said professor had put Draco through during class.

For some strange reason, Dumbledore had allowed Moody to cast the Imperius curse on each and every one of his students in order to train them to resist it but nobody had managed to succeed except Harry himself.

So far, Prof. Moody had done the worst of all dares to the Slytherins as he had forced all of them to do the most humiliating things just for his amusement. In less than three minutes, he had Crabbe hopping around the room like a frog, Pansy buzzing around the room like a common mosquito, Blaise dancing ballet like a girl and Draco hopping up and down like a ferret.

Harry hadn't been able to stop laughing hysterically the whole time, pissing his friends off even more until Blaise finally asked him in annoyance why the asshole of Slytherin was in such a good mood. Harry had just smiled at him, earning him a disturbed look from Blaise before Draco had snorted in disgust, shaking his head at the look on his best friend's face.

Prof. Moody had been impressed, to say the very least, with Harry's ability to resist the Imperius curse, something nobody else in their year had been able to do. Draco had been aware of his best friend's stubbornness and his strong will at certain occasions but he hadn't known that he was strong-minded enough to resist such a curse.

*He really is hardheaded...* He thought wryly, smirking as Harry cheerfully whistled as he walked, earning them more and more

conspicuous stares from the younger year levels at the cheerful look on Harry's normally glaring face.

"What are you so bloody cheerful about, Potter??" Draco snapped angrily, his silver eyes blazing at the other boy but Harry just shrugged and turned to smirk at him, shaking his head.

"Honestly Draco... Must you always have such a scowl on your face?" He kidded, causing Draco's jaw to drop to the floor in shock.

"What do you expect me to do, Harry?! In case you've forgotten, your twin sister is still out cold, lying in a bed in the hospital wing and you can afford to walk around whistling as if you don't give a bloody damn about it?!" He exploded angrily, both boys stopping in the middle of a deserted corridor.

Harry's grin instantly faltered and his eyes darkened as he pondered the meaning of Draco's words. "Of course I care about AJ, Draco. I *love* her...She's my sister... It's just that—"

"It's just that now that you've got Granger coax you, you can afford to abandon your sister like that?!" Draco yelled furiously, his eyes blazing with an unmistakable sort of rage that left Harry speechless.

"N-no... That's not it... I haven't abandoned AJ, Draco... I just—"

"You just think that now that she's out cold, you can spend time with Granger without having to think about her, is that it? Is that how it's going to be, Harry? You're replacing AJ with Hermione?" Draco accused, shoving Harry away violently.

That did it. Harry's eyes flashed as he stepped forward and shoved Draco back, causing the blonde to falter a couple of steps backwards. "Don't you put words in my mouth, Draco, it's not like that! I'm not replacing anyone! I love AJ *and*—"

"Screw you, Potter! Screw you to hell! This is all your bloody fault! If you had only been with her that night... If you had only protected her... If you had only been with *her*!! Not with Granger... None of this would have happened! If only...If only..." Draco couldn't say anymore as his eyes finally filled with frustrated tears.

He finally caved in to his emotions as he stumbled weakly back against the wall and let himself lean against it, closing his eyes painfully. Harry watched, his face pale and clammy as Draco slowly slid down onto the floor until he was in a fetal position, burying his face in his hands.

He watched as Draco tried yet again to force out the words but his own shaking and forcefully hushed sobs made it all too difficult to understand. "Y-your...Your damn fault... If you had only been there for her, Harry... It's your fault... It's all your fault... Y-your fault..." He stuttered again and again, crying softly.

*Looks like all the pressure and self-loathing is finally driving him crazy...* Harry thoughtsadly, watching as Draco's shoulders shook with quiet, suppressed sobs as he spoke.

He couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt as he stood there, watching as Draco, the boy he had always respected for his control over his emotions, sat huddled like a little boy in the shadows. The sight was almost too much for Harry to comprehend...

"You...You really love her so much don't you?" Harry asked softly, walking over to the huddled figure and leaning down to squeeze his shoulder comfortingly. Draco didn't answer, keeping his head buried in his arms as Harry sighed and sat down next to him, leaning his head against the wall behind them.

"Draco...Calm down. I know how frustrating this all is right now and I understand all the stress you're going through with this... Talking to her each day and never getting a response...Seeing her so close and yet, she seems so far away...Trying everything you could to wake her up but all in vain..." Harry's voice trailed off, his eyes looking downcast.

"Being able to touch her...To hold her and yet knowing she can't feel it...She can't hear you...Not knowing what to do...Feeling so lost and helpless...I understand that..." He said softly, his eyes glazing over.

"Believe me, Draco, I know all that. I feel it all. I know how much it hurts and how frustrating it can be... But...Bloody hell, Draco, could

you be more of a man about it?!” Harry snapped, surprising Draco enough for him to raise his head and stare back with teary eyes.

“Do you really think this is going to help at all?! What kind of a man are you Malfoy?! Are you a Slytherin or not? Where’s your fucking resourcefulness and determination? Why are you going all Hufflepuff on me?!” Harry snapped again, smirking at him in disgust.

Draco’s eyes finally flashed as they narrowed themselves into dangerous slits, his form tensing in fury. “Hufflepuff?! What—”

“Look... It’s obvious at this point. No one can wake her up but you, Malfoy. I know it... Somehow I know it. I can feel it. So stop crying like a damn baby and do something about it!” Harry drawled, rolling his eyes at him.

Draco looked as though he was going to explode again. “I *am* doing something about it, Potter! I’ve been trying again and again and—”

“Well obviously not hard enough... If only *I* had been her last thought, I would wake her up somehow but I can’t, Draco. Because it’s *you*. I don’t know how I know that but it’s *you*. So figure something out, *ferret-boy*.” Harry finished, giving him one last smirk before he stood up, his cloak swishing behind him as he made to walk away.

Draco stared after him with wide eyes, his jaw hanging open in confusion. He was just about to call after him again when Harry froze and turned around himself, looking at Draco right in the eye.

“You know what AJ once told me?”

Draco shook his head silently, watching Harry as he finally transformed his smirk into a gentle smile, a knowing look in his eyes.

“She once said she was afraid of falling asleep because of the nightmares... The nightmares that wouldn’t go away... And that she was afraid of being alone...Afraid of the darkness and the cold...” He whispered softly, his voice barely heard in the silence of the corridor.

“And then I promised her that no matter what happened, I would find her in that dream and save her...Like a prince in a fairy tale. I know

now that that prince was never meant to be me...It's you, Draco." He finished, sighing again before turning and leaving an ashen-faced Draco to his thoughts, both boys never noticing the tear in the other's eye.

*What...What did he mean by that?? How do I...* Draco didn't have the strength to finish that train of thought, sighing before burying his head in his arms again.

He sat there for a long moment, silent and unmoving as a statue until an idea finally hit him and he raised his head up instantly, his eyes glowing in thought.

"That's it.... Harry's right, that's it!" Draco exclaimed in realization, his eyes brightening and his face breaking out into a reckless grin before he jumped up and bolted for Prof. Snape's office, an idea already set into his mind.

As he raced down the corridors, a group of Hufflepuff first years scrambled to get out of his way, nearly screaming when Draco shoved past them in annoyance and rounded the corner, a determined look on his face.

He caught sight of Crabbe and Goyle going the opposite direction and shoved past them, ignoring their loud grunts and bewildered questions shouted after him. Both just shrugged and scratched their heads, looking more clueless than ever.

Draco winced and stopped dead in his tracks as he caught sight of Padma Patil and her group of Ravenclaw girls making their way in the opposite direction towards him. Hoping she hadn't noticed him, Draco carefully pressed himself against the wall and eased his way to Snape's office with a mischievous grin on his handsome face.

Padma didn't seem to notice him as she and her friends walked on, endlessly talking amongst themselves about things Draco could never have understood about girls like her.

Rolling his eyes in amusement, he slipped into Snape's office and closed the door quietly behind him. *Hope Snape doesn't think of*



*going into his office anytime soon.... Now where's that Sleeping potion...* He thought, his eyes searching the office in silence.

He made his way over to the shelves in the corner, willing his feet to be as quiet as possible as he walked. Slowly, he peered up at the different labeled potion bottles in front of him...

"Hmm... Didn't realize Prof. Snape was a neat freak..." He muttered absently to himself rifling through the bottles one by one to find the one he was looking for.

"And I didn't realize that one of my most favored students was such a sneak..." Draco jumped at the familiar voice behind him, instantly whirling around to see Prof. Snape's jet-black eyes glaring down at him in suspicion.

Draco colored instantly in embarrassment, giving his professor an apologetic grin in response. "Er... Sorry, Professor... I didn't mean to intrude or anything but—"

"But you thought you could just waltz into my office and take what you needed now did you? I'm rather disappointed in you, Mr. Malfoy. Seeing is that you are a Slytherin, I would have expected more respect and obedience from you." Prof. Snape drawled, narrowing his eyes at the blonde Slytherin in front of him.

Draco winced again, biting his lip as Snape's eyes bore right through his shaky frame, obviously demanding an explanation for his actions. "Well, you see, Prof... I didn't mean to break in or anything, it's just that... Well—"

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy? Would you care to enlighten me?" Prof. Snape interrupted, calmly walking around the other Slytherin and settling down on his desk, peering at Draco in curiosity.

"I... Sir, I've found a possible way we could use to wake up AJ." He answered, truthfully, earning him a surprised look from his professor.

"Is that so, Draco? What, may I ask, do you have in mind?" Snape asked, interested now as he eyed Draco expectantly.

“Well...Sir, It's kind of hard to explain. What I need now sir is for you to give me an ordinary sleeping potion and come with me to the hospital wing.” Draco said hastily.

“Draco, I hardly think that—”

“*Please*, sir! Trust me...I have a plan... I think I may know how to wake her up.” Draco interrupted persistently, looking up at Snape as his teacher sighed in response, nodding reluctantly.

“Very well... But this had better not be some hoax, Draco. I am in no state right now for that...” He said warningly as he walked over to the shelves and pulled out a bottle of clear, crimson liquid and handed it to Draco, who inspected it carefully in his hand.

“Thank you, Professor. Now come on, I need you to come with me!” He rushed out, yanking on his teacher's arm and successfully managing to drag a protesting Snape all the way to the hospital wing.

“Mr. Malfoy, you are acting like a common child! Restrain yourself!” Snape raged, pulling his arm away as the other passing Hogwarts students hid a few amused smiles behind their hands when they saw them.

“What are you all looking at?! Back to class!” Snape barked irritably at them, causing Draco to smirk in spite of himself in amusement as the other students hastily sped up their pace, afraid of the professor's known anger.

He shook his head before he pushed through the doors of the hospital wing quietly, not wanting to attract Madam Pomfrey's attention before slowly making over to the bed at the far corner of the room, all too familiar with the surroundings now.

“Mr. Malfoy, what exactly is it that—”

“Shhh... Sir, would you by any chance know how to cast a mind-binding charm?” Draco asked suddenly as he drew back the curtains around AJ's bed before looking at Snape.

“Mind-binding charm? Of course I do, Draco, though I don’t see why that is important right now.” Snape said pointedly, raising his eyebrow at Draco in question.

Draco looked at AJ solemnly as he took her hand into his own and raised it to his lips, giving it a lingering kiss. “Sir... Please...Trust me right now. Can you cast the binding charm on us?” He asked softly, looking at Snape.

Snape hesitated for a moment before taking his wand out and looking at Draco curiously. “What exactly do you plan to do, Draco?” He asked, fusing his eyebrows together in question.

“Sir... I thought maybe...Maybe I could get AJ to wake up if I got to her in her dreams... You once said that the draught of endless sleep potion made its drinker have endless dreams of painful memories... Sir, I think I can get through those memories and wake her up... I just need you to bind our minds together before I take the sleeping potion.” Draco explained calmly, looking at Snape right in the eye.

Snape met his gaze evenly, considering the idea before he sighed again and shrugged, rolling up his robe sleeves as he did. “Well... It’s not like we have any other options at this point... You sure you want to do this, Draco?” He asked, raising his wand readily.

Draco nodded in reassurance, tightening his hand around AJ’s before he closed his eyes just as Snape muttered the spell, immediately causing a faint green light to surround both students in front of him.

As soon as the glow had gone, Draco leaned over and pressed a lingering kiss on AJ’s lips before pulling away and drinking the clear red potion in one gulp.

“Draco—”

Snape never got to finish his sentence as the blonde Slytherin collapsed onto the bed beside AJ, his eyelids shutting heavily in a deep sleep.

Hermione smiled to herself as she felt Harry’s iron-like arms wrap possessively around her waist, the said Slytherin soon resting his

chin on her shoulder as they both stared off silently into the sunset. Somehow, she had managed to drag Harry off away from his usual crowd of adoring fans and had convinced him to walk with her along the lake's edge to watch the sunset with her.

Harry had been slightly reluctant at first, obviously annoyed and skeptical about watching the sun disappear into the horizon but the pleading look on Hermione's face had made him give in to the Gryffindor's request.

He had to admit, this had been the first time a girl had invited him to this kind of 'date' and he was slightly curious about what Hermione found so beautiful about the sunset but since she really didn't give him a choice in that matter, he had finally walked with her with a forced smile on his face.

Pretty soon, he found that he couldn't have cared less what they were going to do as long as he had his arms wrapped tightly around Hermione's form and her body pressed onto his, comforting him with its warmth.

Hermione had been thrilled, to say the least, at Harry's acceptance to go with her despite the possibility of being seen by another student along the school grounds. It seemed that the popular Slytherin didn't care anymore about who found out about them and just the thought of that possibility caused Hermione to break out into a beautiful smile.

What an ironic yet beautiful sight they made walking along the water's edge at that very moment... A young couple hopelessly in love with each other as they walked, in their school uniform, silently with glowing smiles on their faces.

Definitely ironic... One would have had to blink and check thrice to believe that a Slytherin, particularly Harry, would have allowed to be seen in such a romantic setting with a Gryffindor of all people...

Fortunately, the couple seemed to be the only ones outside as Hermione walked gently and quietly to herself, Harry attached to her waist behind her, clinging to her as he followed right after.

She had been laughing in amusement the whole time at Harry's usual bratty and arrogant remarks every now and then while Harry had just glared at her in irritation in response. If before this all happened, she had found Harry's personality to be extremely unnerving and intolerable, now she found his self-centered comments and reckless cold tendencies to be quite cute.

*He's actually growing on me now... Merlin, I've got it bad...* Hermione thought to herself, chuckling as she blushed at the thought.

It seemed it had been such a long time ago when she had feared Harry as the notorious leader of the Slytherins... It was hard to imagine that this same guy holding her so tenderly right now was the same jerk who had done all those horrible things to her in the past...The same jerk she had hated and despised repeatedly...The same jerk who would sneer at her and make the rudest of insults every time he opened his mouth. Her and *Harry Potter*... Never in a million years...

*Oh what are you complaining about? Isn't he the one you've been fantasizing about being with ever since second year?* An annoying voice teased inside her head, causing her to glow red in embarrassment.

"Of course... Just like all the other girls in the school..." She muttered under her breath, answering her own silly question and momentarily forgetting that Harry was there with her.

Harry gave her a confused smile, raising an eyebrow in question. "All the other girls in school what? What do you mean by that, Hermione?" He asked curiously, cutely scratching his head.

Hermione jumped, startled and turned to face Harry with a blush evident on her features, shaking her head hastily. "N-nothing, Harry, forget it. I was just thinking about something, forget it." She rushed out, laughing weakly.

The raven-haired Slytherin raised his other eyebrow this time in response but gave her a lopsided grin, looking all too amused with her nervous answer. "Okay...But you had better been thinking about me..." He drawled, winking at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes but laughed fondly, shaking her head at him. "Arrogant... Slytherin... Brat..." She said in amusement, biting back a smile as Harry glared weakly at her.

It all seemed like it had never happened now... Harry was a different person when he was with her. And she liked it that way...It made her feel as though she was the most special girl in the world to him...

"Hermione?" Harry asked softly, surprising Hermione at the timid tone of his voice as she turned to look at his solemn face over her shoulder, seeing the uncertainty in his green eyes.

"Are you...Are you happy with me?" He whispered, turning his head so that his gaze met hers, his emerald green eyes boring intensely into her own brown orbs, making her shiver.

He looked just like the way he had looked at her the night they had made love... Intense and penetrating yet all the while tantalizingly beautiful and breathtaking... It caused her entire form to tremble with desire at the memory.

Hermione could only smile in response, lightly hitting him on the side of his head at the absurdity of his doubtful tone.

"You silly, spiky-headed git... Of course I am... I'm the top of every class I'm in... I'm in running for the prefect badge for next year...*and*...I'm head over heels with the most handsome, *sweetest* guy in the world." She answered, leaning over to brush her lips gently with his.

Harry cringed at the mushy response, causing Hermione to laugh again at the look on his face. "What? You don't like being called sweet, Harry?" She asked, dropping a feather-light kiss on his cheek.

"Granger, let's get one thing straight okay? You're definitely right about the handsome part but I'm anything *but* sweet. You say that again and you'll be sorry." He threatened playfully, placing a tender kiss on Hermione's neck.

Hermione purposely let out a Slytherin duo smirk as she leaned against him again, her eyes remaining on the beautiful scenery of

colors in front of them from where the couple stood on the edge of the lake.

“You do and you’re never getting any again, Mr. I’m-such-a-bad-ass-Slytherin Potter.” She retorted smugly, nearly laughing out loud at the aghast look on Harry’s handsome features.

“Merlin, for a Gryffindor, you sure got *me* whipped...” He answered meekly, pretending to look downcast before he laughed as well and rolled his eyes, burying his face into the crook of her neck again.

Hermione felt her heart jumping rapidly up and down her chest and her spirits soaring high above them but she squelched it all inside, struggling not to break out like a foolish little girl in front of Harry. They fell into a deep silence after that, Harry’s eyes closed and his face still buried in her neck while Hermione kept her eyes on the sky above them, patiently waiting for the colors of the sunset to spread out onto the clear blue sky.

Then, without warning, Harry had pulled away from her, causing Hermione to attempt opening her mouth in protest but Harry silenced her with a persistent kiss, turning her around so that they were face to face.

“Harry, what—” She stopped when Harry raised a hand and cupped her cheek gently, using his other hand to clasp hers as he gave her a loving, affectionate smile.

“If you’re happy with me, Hermione, then let’s...Let’s make it official then.” He said all of a sudden, a warm twinkle in his normally cold green eyes that Hermione had never seen in them before.

She felt as though her heart had momentarily stopped beating in her chest... Had she really heard Harry right with his words? She didn’t exactly want to assume anything yet... If there was one thing she learned about loving Harry Potter, it was to never assume anything with him... Something she would be sure to remember from now on...

“What...Harry, what exactly do you mean—”

“I mean...Go out with me, Hermione. Go steady with me...Be...” Harry’s voice trailed off for a moment as he looked away, almost in nervousness or fear. Hermione watched him patiently as he took a deep breath and raised his eyes to meet hers again, this time a more confident look on his face.

“Be my girlfriend...” He whispered softly, biting his lip as Hermione’s eyes nearly widened to the size of the Quidditch quaffle and her heart fluttered excitedly all the way up to her throat.

“H-Harry...”

“I want it to be this way... I want you to be with me, Hermione. I love you.” Harry answered sincerely, leaning over and brushing his lips onto Hermione’s own trembling ones.

“So we’re really—?”

“I’ll tell everyone tomorrow. I’ve already told Draco the truth... I can tell the rest tomorrow for you. I don’t care anymore, Hermione... I’m serious about this... I love you. I need you by my side...” He promised carefully, searching her eyes.

Hermione felt her eyes stinging sharply with tears as she stared into Harry’s honest and hopeful gaze, his eyes wide and fearful of rejection as he patiently awaited her response.

This was it then... These were the words she had actually been waiting for ever since she had fallen for the Slytherin... And here he was now, offering them so honestly and sincerely for her that Hermione felt as though she wanted to hold him in her arms and never let him go.

She knew now that if she wanted, Harry was offering her one last chance to end this... He was offering her one last opportunity to save both their reputations and part their separate ways. This would be the turning point in both their lives and she knew it as well as he did... *This is the part in the story in which I get to choose which road I want to take...Which ending I want to have.* She realized, biting her lip.



If she chose to accept him now, she *and* Harry would have to face the consequences that lie ahead of them. Everything would change from there...Everything... This was the big step...The *final* step in their relationship...Should she choose to accept it, they would be taking it on a more serious level altogether.

But then again... She already knew her decision anyway before these things ever came into her mind... She knew it now as she stared into those beautiful emeralds gazing back at her with so much love and passion she never felt before...

*Once I choose to do this now, Harry would become a part of my life forever...* Hermione thought to herself, raising a hand and stroking his smooth cheek as Harry seemed to lean into the touch, almost desperately in growing anticipation for her answer.

She knew he was sacred that she might somehow reject him but right now, Hermione found that she didn't really have to answer his proposal with regular words... There were just some things better expressed in actions....And...*Harry already 'is' a part of my life...*

She broke her own flooding thoughts as she boldly stepped forward, hooked one arm around Harry's neck and pulled him close, claiming his lips for a long, searing kiss that pretty much answered his question for her.

Harry body grew slightly limp as he managed to weakly lock his arms around her and kiss her back, his eyes fluttering shut and his heart doing crazy back flips in his chest.

They had barely noticed the sinking sun behind them as the familiar patterns shades of orange began to illuminate the Hogwarts Lake, casting a beautiful setting seemingly perfect for the romantic atmosphere they had built up.

Hermione pulled away instantly, her eyes widening as she grabbed Harry's hand in hers and yanked him to face the scene, a smile lighting up her beautiful face. "Wow...It's beautiful..." She breathed in a breathless whisper, her face still flushed from their heated kiss.

"Yes...You are..." Harry agreed softly, his eyes not focused on the setting sun in front of them but instead, on the beautifully glowing girl beside him as she blushed darker at his words, her gaze dropping to the ground shyly.

Harry lifted the corners of his lips into a half-smile, half-smirk before he pulled her to him again, his arms snaking around her waist. "So... What's your answer, Ms. Granger?" He asked again, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear for her.

"Hmm..." Hermione pretended to ponder on the thought while Harry's form tensed in doubt, his arms tightening even more around her at her tone of voice.

"Before you say anything else...I just want to say...I love you so much, Hermione. Despite everything and what everyone would say, I love and will always love you, no matter what...I...I promise, Hermione, I'll never leave you again...I've made that mistake one too many times already... I never want to again..." He whispered, kissing away the tear that had rolled down her cheek.

"Harry... I—"

"You're stuck with me now, Granger. I hereby promise, from this day forward, that I will let nothing...and no one... *No one*...Not AJ, not Draco, *no one*...ever come between the two of us or separate us again. I never want to hurt you again..." He continued, brushing his lips against her forehead.

Hermione couldn't respond, her vision blurring with tears as Harry only smiled and gently pushed her head back to rest on his chest, his fingers stroking her hair as he spoke again.

"All those times I hurt you in the past...All that shit I put you through...You never deserved any of it, Hermione. I know that know...And I would do everything now, everything in my right, to fight for you. I'd endure anything for you just so you wouldn't get hurt again... I love you too damn much to—"

“Oh, stop it now, you prat! My answer’s yes, already!” Hermione finally blurted out, interrupting him midsentence before he made her cry some more.

Harry blinked, surprised at the outburst but he didn’t have time to think upon it as Hermione launched herself into his arms, her hands locking themselves around his neck and her lips finding his, meeting in a passionate kiss that left both of their knees weakening at the impact.

Just as he felt his head beginning to grow fuzzy and spin around in wild circles over and over again, Hermione broke the kiss and buried her face in his chest, sniffing softly as Harry took the initiative to pull his long robes around them both.

“I love you Harry...”

Harry didn’t respond but he knew Hermione didn’t need him to. Right now, they were both just content to be standing here like this, unafraid of what others or their friends would say....Just being together knowing the love they felt was being reflected from the other...

The sun had long set now, leaving the once bright sky a darkening orange and blue mural high above their heads but the couple didn’t seem to care, their minds worlds apart from the Hogwarts grounds.

Somewhere in their minds, they had both heard the sound of the school bell sound off loudly in the distance but neither one of them seemed willing to move, frozen there on the spot as though they were unaware of the world around them...

*‘Where am I?’*

*Blinking, Draco carefully stood up from where he had fallen onto the floor as he glanced around his surroundings. There was something vaguely familiar about this house... He was sure of it. He just couldn’t pinpoint what it was...*

*“Lock her in the closet! Hurry up!” Draco barely had time to react as a group of kids of about 9 or 10 years old rushed by him, unaware of*

*his presence as they forcefully dragged a young, struggling girl by the arm with them.*

*Before they saw him, he quickly slipped into the opposite corridor, peering through the corner to watch what they were about to do. His eyes found themselves focusing on the small, black-haired girl with them.*

*“No! Please, let me go, Dudley! Harry!” The girl protested, her tear-stained cheeks flushed with frustration and fear as the group of kids continued to drag her across the hallway, laughing at her futile attempts to escape.*

*Draco’s eyes widened in shock and realization when he saw the girl’s wide and fearful emerald green eyes as she looked up from their struggle.*

*That’s when it hit him...He ‘had’ seen this house before. This was Privet Drive... This was Harry and AJ’s house... Why... “Why would AJ be dreaming of being here?” He thought out loud, confused.*

*‘AJ...’ He thought, watching helplessly as a boy opened a small, dark closet at the end of the hall. AJ cried out again as Dudley shoved her inside, ignoring her fearful screams of protest before slamming the door shut, cutting off her voice.*

*“Hurry! Lock the door before anyone sees us! Go!” Dudley urged, laughing gleefully as his friends fumbled with the lock while another boy leaned heavily against the door to prevent AJ from escaping.*

*“Please, Dudley! Let me out! Please! It’s dark in here, please!!” AJ screamed out again, her voice cracking as Draco heard her soft sobs even through the door.*

*“Not a chance! Freaks like you deserve to be locked up like this!” Dudley retorted, chortling as they finally managed to lock the door. AJ banged helplessly on the other side while the boys watched her in amusement, laughing amongst themselves.*

*'Bastards...' Draco thought, his eyes darkening in undeniable anger as he watched Dudley grab a small shoe from the floor and hurl it against the door, causing AJ to scream in surprise from the other side.*

*'Merlin... I get it now... These dreams... Her dreams... They aren't nightmares... They're memories... Painful childhood memories she can't forget... Memories she can't get out of...' He realized, watching sadly as Dudley and his friends began hurling more and more objects at the door.*

*"Slut! Why don't you fight back?! Slut! Slut!"*

*Draco clenched his jaw in rage as he heard AJ's soft, helpless sobs on the other side, enduring the taunts and harsh insults that were being thrown at her.*

*'That's it, I've had enough.' He thought, angrily making his way towards the kids but just as he was about to reach them, he found himself surrounded by total darkness yet again, silence filling the sudden emptiness around him.*

*Looking around, his eyebrows fused together in confusion. 'Where was the house? Where were the kids?? Where... Where was AJ?'*

*Then, as though a hidden power had heard his thoughts, the surroundings brightened again and he found himself in another room. Looking around, he heard a distinct sound of a young child crying, the voice sounding faintly familiar...*

*"Harry?" He asked out loud, feeling a surge of surprise to rush through him as he heard the unmistakable yet higher voice of his best friend's sobs in the distance. Glancing around once more, he finally grew aware of the primp and neat interior of the Dursley's living room, remembering how it had looked like from when he had seen it last summer.*

*"What am I doing here?" He asked no one in particular, walking around and peering at the numerous framed photographs of Dudley scattered around the room, sneering scornfully at the sight.*

*At that same moment, he heard loud thumping footsteps heading for the room, causing him to freeze abruptly for a split second before dashing to hide behind the couch just in time as the door burst open.*

*Draco cautiously glanced from where he was, surprised to see such a sight he never thought he would ever see in his lifetime. There they were, two scruffy, black-haired kids no older than seven or eight kneeling on the floor of the fireplace together, crying against one another.*

*“Harry and AJ...” He whispered to himself, a sad feeling filling up inside him as he watched the tender yet heartbreaking scene.*

*He couldn’t believe that they could have endured so much as children...He himself grew up to be spoiled and lavished with all sorts of love and affection during his own childhood... He never had to deal with this kind of misery he was seeing now.*

*Moving to see them a bit more, Draco saw that Harry’s small, frail form was battered and bruised, obviously by a leather strap as the scars left long harsh purple spots on his pale skin. He was currently sobbing loudly onto his sister’s embrace as AJ buried her face onto his shoulder, stroking his hair comfortingly.*

*“I-I h-hate them....Th-they wouldn’t hurt us like this if Mommy and Daddy were still alive..” Harry spoke softly, his child-like, innocent voice cracking as he hiccupped and cried against her, his form trembling.*

*“I-I’m sorry Harry...” AJ whispered, sniffing as she let her own tears fall freely, staining her own dirt-smudged dress.*

*“It hurts so much AJ... I was crying...and crying...And Aunt Petunia kept on hitting me...and... It just hurts so much... She said I was a bad child...” Harry whimpered, sobbing softly as he tried to speak the words.*

*AJ didn’t do anything but tighten her small, fragile arms around him, trying to get him to stop crying any way she could. “I-I’m n-not a bad person, am I AJ? I-I’m not a bad child...I-I-I’m not...” Harry cried again, trembling uncontrollably.*

*“N-no...Harry, you’re not a bad person. You’re not...” AJ whispered, leaning over and giving her brother a silent kiss on the cheek, hugging him tighter to herself just as another pair of heavy footsteps made their way towards them.*

*“Boy! Where the bloody hell are you, I’m not finished with you yet! Get over here or I’ll whip you into oblivion!” Petunia Dursley shrieked as she violently slammed the door open, revealing the huddled twins as they struggled to scramble away.*

*Harry immediately tore himself away from AJ and shoved her away, his child-like eyes panicking in fear. “Go, AJ! Go, before she catches you and hurts you too! Go!” AJ sniffed but made to crawl backwards just as Mrs. Dursley snatched Harry up by the arm.*

*Draco watched, his face pale and motionless as AJ began to cry again, watching as the enraged woman threw Harry’s defenseless form onto the floor and raised the leather belt in her hand, ignoring Harry’s cries of pain and his pleas of sorry.*

*“Harry!” AJ screamed, crying uncontrollably now as she heard Harry’s loud pained whimpers over and over again while Mrs. Dursley continued to bring the belt down again and again...and again...*

*Draco was hardly aware of his own tears that were now rolling down his ashen cheeks and onto his robes, watching the scene as though he was unable to move from his spot.*

*“No! Please, Aunt Petunia, No! I’ll be good, I promise! I’m sorry!” Harry whimpered, cowering away from her just as Mr. Dursley entered the room, shaking his head in annoyance at Harry’s loud screams.*

*“AJ, go!” Harry screamed, finally managing to get AJ to scramble up and head for the door while Harry had attempted to follow after her but Mr. Dursley had caught him by the arm again and slammed him back onto the hard floor before yanking AJ back with her hair.*

*“Listen here, boy.. You stay there and take your beating like a man should. You wouldn’t want to have your sister punished as well now*

*would you?" Vernon had threatened, yanking AJ up by her ponytail and showing her terrified face to Harry's tearful one.*

*Harry's swollen eyes had widened as he shook his head slowly, another round of tears leaking out of his emerald orbs before he shakily closed his eyes again, ignoring AJ's scream of protest.*

*"That's right. Be a good boy, Potter. Unless you want me to punish your sister too..." Vernon added, sneering at him as Harry's face crumpled helplessly.*

*"Harry, don't—"*

*'I can't take this anymore! I have to do something...' Draco thought, angrily wiping his tear-stained cheeks dry before he bolted out from behind the couch, aiming his wand at the large man in front.*

*Before he could have reacted, however, the room was once again fading from his eyes, fading into a dulling blackness until he found himself in total darkness yet again, silence filling his ears.*

*"What the fuck?! No!!" Draco raged out into the silence, his eyes burning with anger as he began running forward into the black silence, searching around for a sign of the twins. "Dammit, where the fuck am I now?!" He yelled out hysterically, running around desperately, unsure yet uncaring of the direction he was heading for.*

*"AJ!!" Draco screamed, finally collapsing onto the cold floor, burying his face in his hands, panting heavily to catch his breath.*

*The silence seemed to wrap itself around his form, making him feel a strong rush of vulnerability he never felt before as he wrapped his own arms around himself for comfort, taking deep breaths to calm himself.*

*He sat there in that position for a long moment, his eyes shut and his face shielded in his arms before he was finally aware of the lively atmosphere around him, causing him to raise his head up and goggle at the sight that met him.*



*"It can't be..." He whispered out loud in shock, his eyes roaming hurriedly around the familiar scene that lay before him. "What—"*

*There was certainly no mistake about it...The Lake... The castle... The lively bustle of students walking in and out of the castle, their black robes billowing out behind them...*

*"Hogwarts?" He asked in confusion, scratching his head as he glanced around, looking for a trace of familiar faces in the crowd. Several students were looking at him in confusion, obviously wondering what he was doing and he was just about to tell them to get lost when something caught his eye.*

*A group of second year Slytherins had just started to walk back to the castle, their eyes devoid of any emotion as they ignored the other students walking around them. Draco found himself staring at the two boys in front, particularly at the blonde that had caught his attention...*

*Silver blonde hair...Silver eyes... Trademark smirk in place, Slytherin robes... Draco couldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it with his own two eyes.*

*'Merlin's beard... That's...That's me!' He thought, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets when he saw his own familiar Malfoy sneer on his younger self's face. Draco nearly laughed out loud as he took it all in...*

*This was another memory of AJ...This time in Hogwarts during their second year... He could hardly wait what this one was about. Surely it couldn't have been another painful one...He didn't remember anything much about their second year except for the chamber of secrets...*

*He broke off his own thoughts as he saw the younger Harry shove a Hufflepuff out of his way just as they entered the castle, earning him a reprimanding glare from the girl behind him—AJ.*

*The real Draco laughed lightly to himself as Harry rolled his eyes at his sister, ignoring her lecture as he and Draco's younger self entered the castle, finally getting Draco to notice the two girls clinging to their arms as they did.*

*Draco followed at a safe distance, watching as AJ followed after the two boys, Blaise babbling on about nonsense stuff beside her but she didn't seem to be paying much attention.*

*Pretty soon, the younger Harry and Draco had both gone off into their own separate directions with the two girls, leaving AJ and Blaise to themselves in the corridor.*

*AJ rolled her eyes at Blaise before nodding off as they too split directions, AJ heading off into a separate corridor by herself while Blaise made to go down to the Slytherin dungeons.*

*Draco ducked behind an empty classroom as AJ whirled around to make sure no one was following her, her eyes suspicious and cautious before she shrugged to herself and hastily made her way down the corridor.*

*Draco quietly trailed after her, making sure she couldn't see him just as AJ stopped at a nearby classroom, biting her lip nervously before she carefully slipped inside. Despite himself, Draco felt his heart momentarily stop beating... If his memory served him correctly, he should know exactly what was happening inside that empty classroom... He himself was the one who—*

*“Damn...” Draco hurriedly scampered into the nearest broom closet just as AJ ran back out of the classroom in a frenzied hurry, her footsteps rapid and heavy as she ran down the corridor.*

*He heard her soft, silent sobs as she rounded the corner and disappeared off, leaving him in total silence once more as he stared after her in bewilderment. Curious, he carefully slipped out of the closet and slowly made his way to the classroom AJ had entered, checking around to see if anyone could see him before peering inside.*

*He had to wince at the sight he saw...*

*“Drakkie... Do you think I'm beautiful?” Lila cooed, slipping her arms around Draco's neck as the younger Draco chuckled in response, nuzzling her neck silently.*

*"Of course I do, baby... You know how much I'm crazy about you." Draco replied evenly, leaning over and catching her lips in a rough, hard kiss.*

*Lila giggled and began intertwining her fingers in Draco's hair, pressing her lithe body against his own lean form. Draco growled in response and caught her lips in his again, trapping her between his own body and the wall behind them.*

*The real Draco paled once more as he realized the reason AJ had kept this as a painful memory... 'So it was AJ who had gasped out loud at that time... How could I have been so dense?' He thought, shaking his head.*

*"Draco..... Do you love me? How much do I really mean to you?" Lila cooed again, her playful hands moving to unbutton the top of Draco's shirt as Draco could only smirk in reply, raising an eyebrow at her words.*

*"Does that really matter to you, Lila? You're lucky you're with me now, how many girls can say the same? Now shut up and kiss me, Perrine." Draco had scoffed, yanking her forward and catching her lips in a savage kiss again.*

*Draco couldn't handle watching anymore...He shut his eyes in shame and slowly turned away from the disgusting sight, silently making his way down the corridor forlornly.*

*He barely even noticed the change in setting again as the world around him began to melt away as before, revealing the cloud of blackness that surrounded him and leaving him feeling lonelier than he had ever felt in his life.*

*"I'm sorry, AJ..." He whispered out loud, his face flat and devoid of expression as he found himself flashing by more memories of hers...*

*They had all been painful somehow...All of them had contained a certain emotion which had hurt her enough for the memory to scar itself into her mind forever... Resurfacing again and again in her dreams...Numerous scenes of her and Harry fighting...Facing the*

*dementors in their third year...More images of him with all his past girlfriends... The...The Yule Ball...*

*‘Oh dear god... That night when I kissed Padma... That had been AJ... Fierros had been...That was—’*

*Draco lost it completely. He felt his eyes stinging harshly with tears again but this time, he didn’t bother to cover it up as he lay down on the floor and began crying to himself...*

*All these memories... He had no idea that AJ had experienced so much pain and had kept it all inside her like that... No wonder she had felt so delicate around them...No wonder she had been so helpless...*

*‘If only I can find her now...’ He thought, his heart clenching painfully as the thought echoed itself again and again in his mind. ‘If only I hadn’t been such a dumb ass and told her the truth from the start...’ He added, feeling such a strong sense of self-loathing he never felt before.*

*He stayed that way for a long time, not bothering to look up and glance at the new memory that had already taken form around him, more than willing to ignore the memory altogether. He was just about to raise his head when a soft, familiar voice spoke in front of him.*

*“Are you okay, mister?”*

*Draco froze and looked up with glassy eyes, amazed to find himself looking directly at a six year old version of AJ herself, her own eyes glassy and her hair a disheveled mess.*

*Despite the situation, Draco couldn’t help but smile at her in amusement. “A-are ‘you’, little girl?” He asked gently, pulling a white handkerchief out of his pocket and using it to wipe a stray tear off her cheek.*

*AJ flinched away as if in fear he might hurt her, biting her lip as her eyes widened in panic. Draco watched her silently, afraid of making any wrong move to frighten her away.*

*"I...I won't hurt you, AJ... What are you doing out here all by yourself?" He asked tenderly, using one hand to stroke her bruised cheek.*

*If possible, AJ tensed up even more, her emerald green eyes nearly as wide as saucers. "H-how did you know my name?" She squeaked.*

*Draco gave her a lopsided smile, shrugging. "That's my little secret... Why are you out here all alone anyway?" He asked again.*

*AJ looked away suddenly, stepping back away from him in fear. "I'm sorry... But I'm not supposed to talk to strangers..." She answered timidly, earning a laugh from Draco as he pondered her innocent response.*

*"Very wise of you to think so too, AJ... Okay then, let me introduce myself. My name is Draco... and you... are AJ. So now that we know each other, I'm no longer a stranger." He kidded, giving her a disarming smile.*

*AJ appeared as though she was trying to consider his words before she finally allowed a gentle giggle, obviously amused by his gentle antics. "I guess so... Draco. But I really should be getting along now..." She started, biting her lip uncertainly.*

*"Oh but can't you at least answer my question why you're here all alone? Are you looking for anyone out here? It's kind of dangerous for a girl like you to be alone..." Draco reasoned, looking at her in concern.*

*AJ bit her lip in uncertainty but nodded, relaxing slightly and allowing herself to sit beside him. "I...I've run away from my aunt and uncle so I can't go home... I'm trying to find my brother now. He was the one who ran off first...I have to find him." AJ spoke softly, using a small hand to tuck a strand of dirt-grimed hair away from her face.*

*Draco took that as a cue and looked around them, finally noticing that they were in front of some kind of beautiful lake in the middle of a park somewhere, not a single person in sight with them.*

*“Why are you running away from your aunt and uncle?” He asked although he was betting he already knew the answer.*

*“B-because...They’re angry at us again... They said we did some ‘weird magic’ again...They said they’d punish us again if they found us...That’s why I’m afraid to go back home...” She said, looking as though she would have burst out crying any minute.*

*Draco nodded again, not saying anything but instead, opening his arms out to her comfortingly. AJ looked at him carefully for a long time as though trying to see if he was joking or not before the small girl rushed into his arms, her shivering form clinging onto his own.*

*Draco wrapped his arms around her gently, not wanting to bruise her fragile body, stroking her hair as AJ buried her face in his embrace, tightening her tiny arms around him. He held her for a long time, the two of them like a statue of love frozen in their spot before another voice interrupted them, this time causing AJ to pull away from Draco in hope.*

*“AJ?” Harry looked up at them with big, curious green eyes peering out from a tousled mane of raven-black hair, his clothes nearly big enough to fall off his small frame.*

*“Harry!” AJ rushed into his arms and hugged him tightly while Draco watched the two with a small smile to himself, touched at the tender scene the two children made.*

*‘I know now why Harry had such a hard time letting AJ go... All they ever had to love and love them was each other...’ Draco realized, feeling a bitter wave of sadness for the two kids in front of him.*

*He didn’t even bother protesting when both Harry and AJ began to fade from his view to give way to the ever so unwelcoming darkness once more, revealing only Draco, alone in the dark, staring off into the silence.*

*Only this time the darkness wasn’t silent... This time he could hear something...Or ‘someone’ even in the darkness... Though it was faint, he could hear it clearly... It was the sound of someone crying... He*

*had heard it oh so many times before... And this time it wasn't in a memory...*

*Unsure of what he was supposed to do, Draco began walking towards the sound, seeing nothing but total darkness all around him but more than willing to reach that his destination.*

*"AJ!!" He yelled out loud, finally breaking out into a run as he began hurriedly trailing after the anguished sobs, hearing it grow louder and louder around him until he felt as though he was suffocating inside, unaware of which direction to take.*

*"AJ!!" He screamed again, glancing around him helplessly as the sobs finally began to grow fainter until he was trapped alone in the silence yet again.*

*Draco fell down onto his knees, silently willing himself not to cry like a child again as he listened carefully, praying for any slightest clue as to where AJ might be. He sat there for a moment...Listening closely in the silence like a perfect statue amidst the empty surroundings, unblinking and unmoving...*

*Draco waited silently, holding his breath until...Until he heard it... His eyes popped open in realization. There it was again... The soft, gentle voice singing in the darkness...The voice was soft and mellow but he heard and understood every single word, immediately recognizing the sweet melody of the familiar lullaby...*

*"Shine bright morning light...now in the air the spring is coming...sweet blowing wind, singing down the hills and valleys..."*

*Draco reluctantly began trailing after the direction of the voice, his pace and footsteps quickening with every step until he was literally running towards the sound, a hopeful yet doubting look on his face.*

*"Keep your eyes on me...Now we're on the edge of hell...Dear my love, sweet morning light..."*

*The voice had stopped singing now but Draco couldn't have cared less as he finally found her, seeing the crumpled and huddled,*

sobbing heap on the floor as she finally sang the last words of the song, keeping her eyes trained on the ground.

*“...Wait for me; you've gone much farther, too far...”* She whispered out loud tonelessly, biting her lip before she buried her face on her knees again, crying quietly to herself.

*Though she was hiding her face for him to affirm properly, Draco knew that this one was AJ... Even the scruffy, unkempt hair, the dirty, grungy clothes or the pale and bruised skin didn't fool him...*

*This was his AJ...This was his girl... He knew better. And he found that despite all the dirt and grime he found on her, it seemed Draco had never seen her look more beautiful than she did right now...*

*Perhaps it was because of his blind affection towards her...He didn't really care at that moment...All he knew was that this was AJ...And he wanted nothing more than to gather her in his arms and kiss her sweet lips, telling her how much he loved her so...*

*Hesitantly, Draco shook his thoughts away and took one step forward, unsure of what he was supposed to do. “You know...For an skinny, ugly little brat...You're beautiful...”*

*He heard a soft gasp as the huddled figure suddenly lifted her head up, revealing the shining emerald-green eyes he missed so much peering up at him from the disheveled black hair, the orbs tearing up even more in unhidden happiness.*

*“D-Draco?”* She asked in a hoarse whisper, her bottom lip trembling as she watched him walk closer to her, unsure if he was just another vision or not.

*Draco felt his own eyes stinging but he smiled lopsidedly at her, managing to give out a sarcastic laugh. “Who else would it be, Potter?”* He replied wryly, earning him a choked-up laugh from AJ as she broke out into a teary smile, her beautiful eyes glistening with joy.

*“What took you so bloody long, you git?! I've been waiting for you for the longest time!”* She retorted before she jumped up and ran into his



*arms, burying her face into his chest and wrapping her arms around him.*

*Draco finally let the tears flow as he wrapped his arms securely around her slender waist, leaning over to plant a soft kiss onto her forehead as AJ began crying in relief against him, her whole body going limp in his embrace.*

*Nothing could have described how he felt at that moment...Relief...Love...Happiness... Nothing could have satisfied him more than to have his arms wrapped securely around the girl he loved, feeling her gentle heartbeat beating against his chest in time with his own...He felt as though his whole body would have spontaneously combust right then and there... He had found her...He was actually holding her in his arms as his own...*

*"I-I love you, AJ..." Draco croaked out, tightening his arms around her frame protectively, almost as though he was afraid he would have lost her again if he didn't.*

*And it was at that very moment that he knew one thing was for certain now... The love and tenderness emanating from AJ's form now was for him... He could feel it through the warmth of her embrace...the whisper of her heartbeat...His love was definitely returned.*

*AJ laughed in spite of her own tears, burying her face into the crook of his neck. "You stupid idiot... Why didn't you find me sooner...I almost gave up on you, you know..." She kidded lightly, wiping her tears away.*

*"I'm sorry... I'll never let you wait like that again.. I'll never let you leave my sight from now on... I'm never letting you go, Potter... Never..." Draco replied easily, flashing AJ a weak smirk as she stroked his cheek tenderly in response.*

*"Promise?" She whispered, looking up at him with the same, innocent green eyes he had seen so many times before in the memories... But as his own face began to inch closer and closer to hers, they both found that he didn't need to answer...*

Draco groaned out loud as he slowly willed his heavy eyelids to open, wincing in annoyance as the white light above him made him shut his eyes again.

“Damn bright lights...” He mumbled incoherently under his breath, rolling over and yawning sleepily to himself before opening his eyes again, blinking up at the white ceiling of the hospital wing.

“What the hell...Why am I...Where—” Draco froze and immediately whirled around to see AJ’s motionless body right beside him, her eyes shut tight and her form still as lifeless as before.

Draco felt his heart drop down painfully onto the floor when he saw her, nearly screaming and pulling his hair out in frustration at the failure of his attempt to wake her up.

He looked around the dark room, a part of him somehow registering the fact that he had been asleep the entire afternoon and that it was now in the middle of the night but another part of him couldn’t have cared less, his attention drawing back to the girl beside him.

Draco felt his eyes fade slowly, watching AJ’s face as he collapsed back onto the bed beside her, all of his efforts and energy drained out of him completely.

*After all that...After all that and she still hadn’t woken up...What more do I have to do to end this?!* He thought, sighing. He was exhausted...Physically *and* emotionally from all of this and yet, he was getting absolutely nowhere!

Draco was just about ready to give up when AJ’s eyes finally began to flicker slowly, causing his breath to hitch in his throat. He squelched down the jump of hope his heart was doing in his chest as he watched cautiously, not wanting to expect anything to happen.

Then, finally, those pale eyelids lifted, revealing the emerald-green orbs Draco had been longing to see for so long now. Draco froze, unable to say anything as AJ’s eyes slowly focused themselves and she finally smiled at him, causing Draco’s heart to jump into his throat.

“Hey you big ugly idiot...” She whispered softly with a weak tone of teasing in her voice, using one hand to cup his cheek gently, stroking the soft skin in a tender caress as she looked at him.

“...H-hey...” He stuttered out, his eyes wide with disbelief as he watched her once lifeless body so full of life and animated in front of him once again.

She didn’t say anything, brushing her lips against his forehead before pulling him close until his own forehead was pressing against hers, their faces inches apart.

“I—I—AJ, the dreams...Your memories, I—” AJ didn’t let him finish as she raised a finger and pressed it against his lips, stopping him from speaking.

“You don’t have to say anything, Draco... I know... I... I was there... I saw it. I...I saw everything...” She told him softly, stroking his hair comfortingly.

Draco nodded, closing his eyes and savoring the feeling of her silky fingers running through his hair as he sighed and buried his face onto her neck. “*I...I love you...*” He whispered nervously into her ear, kissing the tender skin caressingly as he did.

AJ wrapped her arms around him again, her hands resting against his firm back. “I know... I heard you. I heard everything you and Harry said to me when I was asleep... I could hear it all... It was as if my body was asleep but my mind was fully awake...Trapped in a deep slumber of painful dreams...But...You don’t have to explain anything anymore to me, Draco.” She told him gently, kissing his ear.

Draco felt his heart pounding nervously in his chest at her words, his eyes going as wide as saucers. “Everything?? So then you must already know about Harry and Gra—”

AJ squeezed him tightly in acknowledgement, nodding against him in response instead of letting him finish his sentence.

“I know...” Was all she said, an unreadable tone in her voice that sounded suspiciously like sadness but Draco knew better than to

prod on the subject, immediately nodding and finding another thing to talk about.

“So...All those times that I was talking to you...You...You heard me? A-all of it??” Draco asked, his eyes glowing in a strange sense of happiness.

“...Yes.” AJ agreed softly, looking up at him and offering him a small, lopsided grin which Draco returned with a smirk, rolling his eyes at her.

“Even stuff about...Weasley?” He asked tensely, watching as AJ stiffened at the mention of Ron’s name, her face paling.

“...Yes. But he doesn’t matter now, Draco... Nor does Lavender... None of that matter to me now...All that matters to me now is you...” She said, looking intently at him, her face flushed.

Draco easily returned the gaze, his eyes meeting hers for a long, lingering moment before he coughed and they both looked away sharply, both Slytherins sporting rather dark red stains on their pale cheeks.

AJ hid a small smile to herself, her heart pounding so loudly she was almost scared Draco could hear it but the thought slipped out of her mind when she felt Draco’s hand somehow sneak its way to clasp around her own, causing her to blush darker at the wink he gave her.

She couldn’t help but notice how noticeably strong Draco’s grip was yet at the same time, gentle as though he was afraid of crushing her hand if he held her too firmly. More out of nervousness of the scene than anything else, she shivered, causing Draco’s eyes to flash in concern.

Before she managed to say anything, Draco had slipped off his black school robe and had draped it over her delicate form, using that same advantage to wrap his arms around her slender figure and pull her to him in a tight embrace.

She shifted uncomfortably against him, slightly conscious of the sheer material of the hospital gown she wore but soon allowed herself to

relax into the warm, sincere action. Sighing, she took a deep breath and rested her head against his chest, listening to his heart beat before he spoke again.

“How about...that guy who attacked you? Do you remember who he is?” Draco asked hesitantly, immediately regretting his words when he felt her form stiffen instantly in his arms in obvious fear.

She looked as though she was thinking hard about what had happened but she sighed and buried her face in his chest, her skin going even paler, if possible. “I...I don’t seem to remember anything that happened that night...” She muttered miserably, her voice muffled.

Draco didn’t respond, waiting for her to continue speaking as she raised her head again, looking grim and disturbed as she spoke.

“All I remember is the Yule Ball... Everything else after that just seems to be a blur... It even hurts when I think about it...” She admitted, wincing again as she felt another sharp pain cut right through her head.

“Then don’t...” He whispered, brushing his lips against her cheek comfortingly as AJ nodded in response, her eyes still shut in pain.

More to get her mind off the question more than anything, Draco finally allowed another smirk again, giving AJ a teasing look. “I’ll bet you had loads of fun with me, didn’t you Potter? Hearing everything around you while I thought you were asleep? How nosy was that? You’re more gossip-hungry than I thought, I—”

“Draco?” AJ asked as she opened her eyes up and looked at him, the green orbs suddenly twinkling merrily and her smile brightening up in amusement.

Draco felt his breathing hitch in his throat at the well-missed sight as he forced an irritable look at the girl in front of him, desperately trying to fight down a blush. “What?” He glared at her in annoyance, raising an eyebrow at her inwardly laughing face, causing her to shake her head in dismay.

“Shut up...” She murmured, boldly wrapping her arms around him and nuzzling his neck in a gentle gesture of affection, causing the blonde to blush darker and squirm uncomfortably.

AJ smiled and looked up at him, her eyes sparkling and glowing with life once again as Draco found himself unable to prevent smiling back, feeling a warm fuzziness start to arise from inside his chest.

“AJ, I... I’ve been meaning to tell you... I...Ever since I saw you that day in the robe shop, I—” Draco never finished as AJ smirked and smothered a white pillow right onto his solemn face, stopping him midsentence.

“Hey! Why you—Potter, you annoying idiot, I was talking here!” Draco growled, yanking the pillow away and hurling it right back at AJ, who laughed and caught it in mid-air, grinning at his icy glare.

“Look... If you’re going to give me ‘the confession’, Draco, I told you... I know all about it...Everything...I—” AJ stopped as Draco shook his head sheepishly.

“Even how I accidentally read your diary?” He asked, his voice nearly too soft to hear but AJ caught his words, her eyes widening in anger.

“You...You read my diary?! But when did you—” She sighed as Draco chuckled to himself in amusement, causing AJ to whack him with a pillow once more, shaking her head.

“Forget it... Never mind, that’s not important right now. What’s important right now is...why didn’t you tell me?” Draco asked softly, his face sobering as he leaned forward and tucked a stray strand of hair behind AJ’s ear.

AJ looked at him in confusion, her eyebrows fusing together delicately. “Tell you what?” She asked, biting her lip.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your past? About all those painful memories? About...” His voice trailed off as a light blush rose up to his pale cheeks.

AJ lifted one corner of her lips to give him a half-smile, shrugging as she guessed the next part of his sentence. "About me having a secret crush on you all this time?" She supplied, her own cheeks tingeing with red.

Draco gave her his heartbreaker smile, nodding smugly, causing AJ to blush even darker in embarrassment. "I...I guess I just didn't realize I did... I always thought I had a crush on Ro—"

Draco narrowed his eyes and whacked her with the pillow again, stopping her words before she said anything else. She glared at him in irritation, causing the other Slytherin to break out into a sneer.

"Why don't you just admit that you were scared Potter? You were scared of admitting to yourself that you loved me because I was the one you really did care about. You were afraid of falling in love with someone like me." Draco pointed out, earning a weak, indignant look from AJ.

"I...I just...I just didn't want to get hurt..." She whispered, her voice pained as she turned away from him, not wanting him to see the tears welling up in her eyes as she faced the truth in his words.

Draco was right of course... She had been afraid... And that had been the cause of all this in the first place. She hated the way he could see right through her... She hated the way he told her right off about her feelings... She hated him...*But I love him so much...* She thought, sighing.

So what if Draco was wildly unpredictable and stubborn? So what if he was a bit reckless and insensitive at times? She should have never expected him to change anyway... Because she realized now that the reason she loved him was actually *because* he was wildly unpredictable...*because* he was stubborn, reckless and insensitive... It was all a part of he was...And she loved him for it.

She loved the smirk, the arrogant personality...The way he always pissed her off...The way he had always seemed to thrill in embarrassing her in the past... But most of all, she loved the way that despite all this, he could still be the sweetest, most affectionate guy to her...

*I love him...And I'm damn well proud of it.* She thought, her heart fluttering wildly in her chest as Draco gently gripped her chin and turned her face to meet his gaze, his eyes looking guilty.

"Hey...I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that... But please AJ...I would *never* hurt you... I know you may think of me as rash and irresponsible at times but I would never hurt you. I promise..." He whispered, using a finger to wipe away the tear stain on her cheek.

AJ gave him a weak, shaky smile in response, her eyes glistening with unhidden love and affection at him as she leaned forward and buried her flushed face on his shoulder. "Of course you wouldn't...Then Harry would be after your head...*both* of them..." She murmured, her voice muffled against him.

Draco blinked in confusion as a scandalized look swept over his handsome face. He took one long moment to register what she had just said before he finally found his voice to speak. "Hey—!"

AJ just grinned and attempted to shove him off, catching Draco slightly by surprise but he growled as he finally pinned her down onto the bed, using his strength to hold her down there until their faces were merely inches apart.

AJ froze, blushing uncontrollably as she looked up and locked her eyes with his intense gaze, feeling uncomfortably exposed under the strong desire evident in those silver orbs peering down at her.

Just as Draco had leaned forward, his gaze focused on her lips, Madam Pomfrey had burst through the door, causing both students to wince in anticipation before they heard her scandalized scream.

"Mr. Malfoy! Get off Ms. Potter, this instant! This is an outrage, taking advantage of a young girl like this! Why I thought you had been taught better!" She shrieked, causing Draco to cringe sheepishly and pull away, his face almost as red as the Gryffindor crest.

AJ barely prevented a laugh as she ducked under the covers again before Madam Pomfrey could notice anything, tossing the blanket over her head to hide her face.



She bit back a powerful wave of giggles as she listened to Madam Pomfrey continuing to berate a meekly nodding Draco about sexual harassment, the nurse obviously unaware of AJ's awakening as she ranted on and on to the red-faced teenager glaring down in humiliation on the floor.

Just as it seemed as though Draco was wishing he would melt onto the floor and disappear, AJ smiled fondly and slipped her hand through his, squeezing it under the blanket.

As soon as the nurse had finished with her endless rant and had left the room in a huff, AJ peered up at Draco, grinning at the completely mortified look on the normally cool Slytherin's handsome features.

She leaned forward and gave him a lingering kiss on the cheek, pressing her forehead to his as she squeezed his hand again. "Thank you...Draco..." She murmured softly.

Draco's eyebrows slowly came together, fighting down the flush on his face as he leaned forward and pulled her into his arms, nuzzling her cheek with his own. "For what?"

AJ didn't respond for a minute, her eyes glazing over as she closed her eyes, loving the gentle way Draco's hand was stroking her hair comfortably.

"...AJ?"

She smiled to herself as she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his cheek, feeling a rush of desire when she heard Draco's soft murmur of appreciation.

"...For giving me a new dream..."

"Good morning..."

Hermione brightened instantly at the familiar voice behind her just as she whirled around to see Harry's nervous but otherwise grinning face at her, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he did.

Looking around to make sure no one could see them in the halls, Hermione stepped forward on her tip-toes and pressed her lips gently onto Harry's in a soft, chaste kiss, her arms wrapping around his lean upper torso.

"Mmm... Aren't we in a good mood, Granger..." Harry murmured as she pulled away, seeing the teasing smirk on the Slytherin's face as he opened his eyes to stare at her.

Hermione laughed, a happy twinkle in her eyes as she raised her eyebrow in mock-annoyance. "Sod off, Potter. Anyway, why are you so carefully made-up? Wanting to make sure you capture everyone's attention later, aren't you?" She accused lightly, gesturing to Harry's once again, nothing-but-perfect appearance.

Alluringly spiked hair, neatly worn and pressed Slytherin robes, serpent earring and dangerously heart-stopping smirk...Yup; she would have to watch out for this one... It wasn't everyday that the hottest guy in school became her boyfriend...Things would definitely be different from now on.

He snorted in response, rolling his eyes at her comment. "Like you aren't...Besides, I'm always drop dead gorgeous...You however...You are breathtakingly beautiful..." He murmured again, pulling her close and brushing his lips over her earlobe seductively.

"Harry! Not here!" Hermione hissed in a scandalized tone of voice, yanking away and attempting to shove him off but Harry barely moved an inch, merely giving a low sexy chuckle before holding up his hands and backing off one step.

"Okay, okay... Perhaps we'll save this little rendezvous for later tonight. For now... Let's get to breakfast and give everyone the shock of their life." He drawled, giving Hermione an evil smile.

Hermione laughed in amusement, shaking her head as Harry briefly inspected his reflection on the glossy luster of a nearby mirror, taking extreme care to check the carefully done spikes on his head before he turned to see her reaction.

“Honestly Harry, you look fine. Come on then, I’m waiting to see how all your Slytherin buddies will react.” She commented, slipping her hand through his and yanking him away from the mirror before he stared too much.

Harry only smirked again, allowing her to drag him off to the end of the hall until Hermione had suddenly stopped abruptly, her eyes widening in realization. “Holy Merlin! Harry, I forgot!” She cried out, groaning.

The Slytherin raised an eyebrow in question as Hermione dropped his hand and attempted to walk back to the Gryffindor towers, a troubled look on her face. “What—What is it, Hermione?” He asked, trying to squelch down a surge of impatience in his voice.

“Oh crap... Harry, can we perhaps do this later at lunch time? I just remembered that I have an appointment with Prof. McGonagall today about something really important so I’ll have to skip breakfast.” Hermione said, giving Harry an apologetic look.

Harry’s eyes narrowed in annoyance as he glared at her in response. “Appointment with McGonagall?! Hermione, can’t you find some extra time to do that later?!” He demanded rudely, giving her a mocking sneer.

A glint of something uncertain and suspicion rose for a brief moment in Hermione’s eyes as she absently bit her lip, obviously deep in thought about something before she met Harry’s normally intimidating glare again, surprised to find out that it didn’t have its normal effect on her as it did to other people anymore.

“I’m really sorry, Harry but this is really important. I’ll tell you about it some other time but I promise, I’ll meet you later after class at lunch. Meet me by the lake okay?” She rushed out, leaning over to give him a brief peck on the cheek before running off, something already setting in her mind.

Harry glared after her retreating back in growing annoyance but his face kept its usual cold and blank expression, not at all hearing the words “Prof. McGonagall” and “AJ” and “tutor” echoing as they had been momentarily issued from Hermione’s lips.

Sighing to himself, he plastered on a derisive sneer on his face before he set out and silently made his way down the corridors towards the Great Hall, ignoring the usual hushed murmurs that broke as he passed by students along the way.

He broke out into loud, mocking laughter as a first-year student he had shoved stumbled over another passing student in the same corridor, causing both of them to fall over messily to the floor in a wild tangle of limbs.

“Watch where you’re going will you?!” He snapped coldly at them, giving them a scornful and menacing glare which they returned with fearful winces, nodding frantically in intimidation when they saw him.

As soon as he had turned around from them, a light hidden smile broke out onto his face and he began whistling under his breath, chuckling at the people rushing out of his way for fear of his wrath being brought down on them.

He was just about to push through the doors to the Great Hall when he heard a wonderfully familiar voice speak up not too far from him, immediately causing his heart to hitch in his throat, a small wave of foolish hope rippling inside him.

“Still bullying students younger and smaller than you... You’ll never really change, will you jerk-face?”

Harry couldn’t help it...He instantly broke out into a wide, tearful smile as he slowly raised his head up, his vision slightly blurred but that didn’t prevent him at all from seeing the well-missed, beautiful sight before him.

Raven-black hair, emerald green eyes, moon-shaped scar... AJ watched him slowly with a reproachful gaze, biting her lip for a brief second before she let out a light chuckle and lifted one corner of her lips in an unsure half-smile before shrugging affectionately.

“Well? Are you just going to stand there or give your little sister a hug? Stupid spiky-headed idiot...” She muttered, barely preventing a laugh as a single tear slipped down her cheek.

Harry didn't respond as he immediately launched himself at her, pulling her into a tight embrace and burying his face into her arms to hide the rapidly forming tears of relief that were forming and falling from his glazed eyes.

AJ gave a weak laugh as she finally let her own tears flow naturally now, content at that very moment to be relishing the safe, warm and secure feeling she felt in her twin brother's strong yet gentle embrace...

It seemed as though whenever Harry was with her, she had no need to fear for anything else... He knew how safe and protected he was in his love...And ironically, it had taken the situation of her being in a deep sleep for her to realize that.

He was more than just her annoying, *slightly* older brother...More than another protective and annoying prat...He was ½ of her soul...Her twin and no matter who they met later on or what happened to separate them, she knew she could never be fully complete without him.

Being in that deep sleep...Seeing all those painful memories replayed in her head again and again and again brought back so much of her hidden pain and experiences...All those sufferings...Those tears...Those hardships that they had gone through...

She had no one there to love her except Harry...He was the only true family she had and will ever have left again and she knew now how much he truly meant to her...She would give anything...*anything* at all to take care of him the same way he always took care of her.

No matter what happened now, she could never find it in her heart to leave or abandon him...Harry is the same now as he was around five years ago when he had run, crying into her arms after their Aunt had beaten him up...He will always be a lost little boy who yearns for the love and affection of another...He may have taken a different form now but none of it has changed.

He still runs to her either way when it comes down to it...And it pained her to have left him alone for such a long time especially during his inner turmoil with Hermione Granger...

*Hermione Granger...* AJ thought as she couldn't help but feel a strong rush of bitter jealousy and anger at the thought of her very twin falling so deeply in love with her longtime rival and enemy.

Oh she knew all about it now...After what Harry and Draco had continually talked about in her presence in the hospital room about their bet, thinking she couldn't hear them...She knew all about their relationship, from both Harry *and* Draco's side...

She had heard everything... Even when Harry had brought Hermione over to the hospital wing to talk to her. If she were to be completely honest though, she had to admit that she loathed the fact that Harry had fallen for Hermione but after a long opportunity to think over it, she knew it wasn't really in her place to stop them.

After all...If Harry loved her...And she loved Harry the same way AJ loved him...*Maybe even more...* AJ added silently, now crying openly on Harry's shoulder... Then... Then she would gladly give them her blessing. As long as her brother was happy...She could learn to hold her own selfish thoughts for him...She loved him too much to keep his love to herself.

*Besides...He deserves much more love than just mine alone...And from what I've heard about them...I'm pretty sure now that Granger can give it to him...She seems to have been the only one who managed to tame him down...She 'must' love him enough to sustain all his stubborn shit.* AJ thought, smiling through her soft sobs.

And now...As much as it anguished her so much to realize that there would soon be times when Harry would no longer run to her in times when he's in need of love and affection, she knew she had to let him go... As much as she loved him...She'd let him go... He would always be her Harry in their own private world anyway... And no matter what happened, she knew that Harry would never leave her as well...

*Now I understand why Harry had such a hard time letting me go with Draco...It hurts like hell to find out that someone else is soon going to have a big share of your twin's love and affection...* She thought wryly, sighing.

She soon broke her own thoughts as she heard Harry's soft, stuttering words, his voice muffled as he buried his face deeper into her arms. "I—I I-love you, you b-big ugly t-t-troll..." He managed, his shoulders shaking weakly in laughter as AJ laughed as well, wiping at her eyes.

"I love you too jerk-face...So much... I always will..." She croaked back, hiccupping and tightening her arms around his form as she felt him grow limp with obvious relief.

"You s-scare me like th-that again and I s-swear, I'll have your neck AJ...D-Do you h-have any idea h-how scared I-I w-was that I might have lost y—" He broke off, turning away in pain but AJ knew understood what he meant as she squeezed him in response, sighing.

"So I take it you missed me then?" She asked softly, earning herself a gentle poke in the ribs from Harry as he rolled his teary eyes in response, glaring at her just as she chuckled, shaking her head.

He suddenly sobered, his eyes dropping to the floor as his arms fell limp at his sides, almost as if he was refusing to look at her for fear of being rejected. AJ's eyes clouded over in concern, watching as Harry sighed and refused to meet her eyes, obviously unsure of what to say.

"AJ...There's something...I mean...Uhm...You ought to know that...Well... Me and...I...Hermione, you see we're—"

But AJ shook her head, stopping his sentence as she offered him a small, pained smile, her eyes glistening again as she spoke. "You and Granger...I know, Harry...I know..." She replied evenly, waving her hand to dismiss the painful idea.

"And...?"

AJ looked up and smiled at him, trying to ease the nervously anxious look on her twin's face. "You...You have my blessing..."

Harry's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "What? But I thought...I thought that you would have...Well...Are you sure? How did you—"

AJ cut him off, laughing at his lack of words as she leaned forward and hugged him again, causing him to relax easily against her arms. "To be honest Harry...I don't exactly favor the relationship...But...If you love her, then I'll respect that...Only that's it. I won't interfere with you...but I...I don't like it..." She explained, sighing.

Harry nodded, understanding completely but smiling at her as he hugged her tighter against him, one hand moving to stroke her hair lovingly as he did.

"I—I promise...One day, I'll find it in my heart to *really* give you my true approval but for now...This is all I can offer...I hope you understand, Harry..." AJ whispered but Harry nodded against her, leaning over and planting a tender kiss on her scar.

AJ smiled at him and offered a hand, causing Harry to return the grin immediately as he took it and performed their secret handshake, ending it by bonking AJ lightly on her scar as she promptly did the same with warmth in her eyes.

"Thank you AJ..." Was all Harry said before he pulled her into a hug again, finally feeling a calming sense of peace overwhelm him as he did.

AJ didn't respond, closing her eyes again and savoring his comforting and familiar warmth as Harry continued to stroke her hair, his eyes fluttering shut as he felt his heart swelling inside him with relief and happiness.

Both of them remained like that for a long moment, ignoring the passing students around them, both of them not noticing the secret smile on Draco's face as he watched them from where he stood hidden in the shadows of a nearby corridor, casually leaning against the wall.

It seemed for that very brief moment, as he watched the two hugging figures of his two closest friends, their forms and appearances had shifted to that of their seven-year-old selves back when he had seen them in AJ's past, hugging each other's trembling form for comfort.



Harry might never know that he had seen those painful memories of his past as well but it seemed to him that those painful memories were exactly what had shaped both Harry and AJ into loving one another the way they did now...

How he envied them...To have a brother or a sister was something he was never truly meant to experience and he longed for that more than ever as he watched on, his eyes dazed as the seven-year-old vision of Harry and AJ transformed back into their normal selves, the two Slytherins finally pulling away from each other.

With a sly smile, Draco finally shook his thoughts away and made his way towards the pair, his silver eyes glowing strangely with a twinkle of happiness he never thought he would actually have and feel right now.

"Morning, Potters." He drawled, smirking easily at them, at the same time slyly letting one hand drop down and claim AJ's secretly, squeezing it behind them with a grin. AJ blushed darkly at the gesture, her eyes dropping shyly to the floor as she untangled her hand from his and gave the offending limb a slap in annoyance.

"Malfoy!" She hissed under his breath at him, blushing even darker at the smirk he gave her in response. Harry hastily wiped at his eyes before letting them dart repeatedly from AJ to Draco then back to AJ, the green orbs widening in realization.

Draco held his breath, almost sure that Harry was going to react violently at the news but to his surprise, Harry let out an amused smirk, smothering a round of laughter behind his hand.

AJ's jaw dropped, her eyes flashing dangerously at Harry as he grinned teasingly at them, his eyes twinkling with a sense of humor and brightness that both AJ and Draco rarely saw in them before.

"So...You and Draco huh? I should have known...It was Draco who woke you up, wasn't he? He finally figured out how to use his upper head to think straight." Harry mocked, causing Draco's eyes to narrow dangerously at him in response.

“Stuff it, Potter.” He snapped, sneering back scathingly at him while Harry sniggered again, slapping him hard on the back.

AJ watched as Harry stopped laughing and eyed Draco closely, almost as if he was searching his eyes while Draco easily returned the glare, not at all intimidated by the cold, calculating look on his best friend’s face.

Holding her breath, she waited silently until Harry finally nodded, a faint hint of sadness in his eyes before he did something nobody would have ever expected him to do...

He pulled Draco into a hug, surprising the other Slytherin for a split second as Harry clapped him lightly on the back again, pulling back and offering his hand to him, which Draco took at once, allowing them both to do their own secret handshake.

“Congratulations then, Draco...You deserve her...Take care of her for me will you? You share the responsibility of looking out for this ugly brat now...I know you can protect her.” Harry said, smirking at a growling AJ.

AJ made to swat him on the arm but he ducked easily, earning a laugh from Draco as the Slytherin duo walked off, leaving AJ grumbling and scowling after them in annoyance. Muttering under her breath, she reluctantly followed after them, rolling her eyes at their sudden antics.

She watched as both Harry and Draco made their way to the entrance doors yet again with big, charming smiles on their faces, their eyes twinkling with life as they began starting up their usual talk on the way to the Slytherin table.

She couldn’t help but smile fondly at the sight as heads turned to gape at the rare, unbelievable sight of the feared, most powerful boys in the school practically bursting with life and laughter as they sauntered over to their seats, smiling like two boys having just won the Quidditch world cup.

*Once arrogant jerks...Always arrogant jerks...No matter who they fall in love with...* She thought, sighing.

Laughing under her breath at the horrified looks on the other students' faces, she finally entered after them and stepped into the Great Hall, feeling a warm feeling of welcome as she heard the Slytherins exclaim in greeting.

*And so the new dream begins...*

**A/N:** Again, that song AJ was singing was actually **Fake Wings** yet again, suggested to me by **K.B. 1004** so it wasn't mine. grin **PLEASE REVIEW, REVIEW, REVIEW!! Email me for comments, suggestions or anything else. You know my email. wink THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO REVIEWED AND EMAILED ME!! HUGGLES**

## Chapter 29- Blood of a Fallen Hero

"AJ!!"

AJ giggled as Blaise literally jumped at her, nearly choking her with his death grip as he began spinning her around like a crazed lunatic, a big smile on his handsome face that AJ easily returned.

"Aw....Missed me that much, Blaisee-poo?" She teased, instantly causing him to release his hold on her and growl in annoyance, his gray eyes brightening up instantly at the familiar words.

"You have no idea..." He replied easily with a lopsided grin, surprising AJ at the sadness in his tone before he lunged at her again, this time going to mess up her hair as AJ frantically fended him off, protesting for him to stop.

When she did manage to shove him off her, she was surprised to see some of the other Slytherins nodding at her in greeting, some of them regarding Blaise with a cold sneer before turning to give a sugary sweet smile at her.

Frowning, she turned to look at Blaise, who gave her a small smile and shrugged, gesturing to Hannah across the room before he offered a hand to her. "Don't mind them; same old discrimination...they don't matter to me anymore." He urged, grinning when AJ nodded and sat down beside him, much to the dismay of some other Slytherins.

AJ ignored them, rolling her eyes just as Harry and Draco sat down their usual spot as well, immediately being surrounded by their wide circle of friends as they began to start their usual sucking up to the popular duo.

"Are you feeling okay now?" Blaise asked, looking at her in concern while AJ nodded again and gave him a smile of reassurance to ease his worried tone.

"I'm okay now, Blaise. Why don't you tell me what's been happening since I've been asleep." She said, suddenly very hungry as she

began heaping a large pile of food onto her plate, causing Blaise to smirk at her in amusement.

"Hungry much, are you?" He teased as AJ began to eat, causing her to glare weakly at him as she chewed her food. When she had swallowed, she gave him an indignant glare, looking annoyed. "Give me a break; I haven't eaten properly in a long time. I need to regain my strength if I'm going to top Granger in class again." She replied, digging into her food again.

Blaise shook his head, smiling at her. "Dare to dream... You've already missed a lot of the lessons now, Potter. I doubt you can catch up that fast to Granger now." He pointed out smugly.

AJ returned his smirk, taking a long gulp of juice before she answered. "Watch me, Blaise. Watch me... Besides, I—"

She stopped when Harry leaned forward and began heaping more food onto her plate, causing AJ's eyes to widen as she turned and glared at him. "You expect me to finish this, idiot?" She snapped, annoyed.

Harry just grinned back, obviously amused before he gestured to the plate, giving her a pointed stare. "You haven't eaten in a long time now, you're right, you need more strength." He reasoned calmly, arching an eyebrow.

Draco looked up at her and smiled in agreement, causing AJ to look away instantly, her face flushing while Harry rolled his eyes, turning back to talk to some of their other housemates.

She turned to talk to Blaise again but just as she had opened her mouth, another voice, this time female, had interrupted her, causing her to turn around and see Pansy and Lila giving her a sickeningly sweet smile.

"How're you feeling then, AJ? We're so happy that you're doing better now... We had been so worried about you." Pansy cooed, patting AJ on the shoulder but AJ had winced and pulled away sharply, not liking the other girl's cold touch.

"I'm sure you were..." She muttered, giving them a cold sneer. "I'm fine now, Parkinson...Shove off." She retorted, surprising herself at her sudden and uncharacteristic bluntness and how she suddenly seemed to repel the idea of being this close to Pansy and Lila—her once close friends in Slytherin.

*Maybe I'm still a bit tired...Nothing's wrong with me, they're just more annoying than usual.* She thought, rolling her eyes.

"Oh...Okay, then...But do you have any idea who attacked you that night?" She asked loudly, causing a nearby professor to look up and stare piercingly at the back of AJ's head, unseen by the said girl.

AJ clenched her fists, gritting her teeth as she struggled to keep from shouting at Pansy in annoyance, somewhat incredibly bothered at her shrilly voice and the sudden shallowness she had suddenly begun to notice in her intentions.

"No, I *don't* know who did it, Pansy...In fact, I don't remember anything that night after the Ball...Everything is still a painful blur in my head...And it hurts when I try to think about it." She answered calmly, anger slowly seething.

"So you don't remember the face of the guy who attacked you? Not even at all?" Lila pressed on, her eyes gleaming excitedly for more gossip.

"No, I don't, Perrine. Now both of you leave me alone, I actually want to have an *intelligent* and *worthwhile* conversation." She snapped again, turning back to talk to Blaise as both girls huffed in insult at her words.

*The professor listening looked away in relief, his eyes narrowing darkly for a brief second before resuming back to talking with his colleagues, keeping a close eye and ear on AJ Potter as he did.*

*How he loathed the girl and everything to do with her... He couldn't have her messing this up for him now...He couldn't have her blowing his cover... Yes indeed, he needed to keep a close watch on Ms. Potter... In more ways than one...*

"Hmph...Excuse us...Since when did you become so bossy and rude, Potter? I didn't know being in a coma could alter your personality and turn you into an over-all bitch. You're almost as bad as that Hufflepuff lover over there..." Lila retorted snidely, smirking at Blaise behind her.

Blaise's gray eyes flashed angrily at her, narrowing themselves into tiny slits. "Mind your own damn business, Perrine...You good-for-nothing whore. Hannah is ten times better than you two will ever be." He spat out in disgust, glaring icily at her.

AJ's eyes widened in surprise as Lila and Pansy both scoffed at him, flicking their hair over their shoulder at the mention of Hannah at the same time looking over at the Hufflepuff table and sneering at the said girl.

"You see what we mean, AJ? He's disgraced us Slytherins with his actions... Don't tell me you're seriously still considering hanging around him now that he's dating a Hufflepuff...Think of the germs he might spread." Pansy added, causing Blaise to shoot up abruptly and lunge for her but AJ grabbed onto his collar and held him back at Pansy's scream.

"I've had just about enough of you and your crap, Parkinson!" He yelled out loud, causing nearly everyone in the Hall to look at them in curiosity just as AJ winced at their interested gazes.

"Leave him alone, Pansy...It's his life. Let him mess it up if he wants...He's a loser anyway." Draco mocked derisively, flashing a sneer at Blaise which he easily returned, his eyes darkening with anger.

"Stay out of it, *Malfoy*, do you always have to be such an insensitive jerk? You don't own other people's lives you know..." AJ suddenly snapped in anger, her eyes glaring warningly at Draco, causing Draco to scowl and return her glare, falling into a heated silence.

Sighing, AJ just looked away and somehow, managed to lock gazes with Ron Weasley across the room, her eyes widening at the intensity of his eyes as he stared openly at her.

Lavender Brown seemed to be glaring silently beside him, seeing the look Ron was giving AJ before she snapped something at him, causing Ron to blink and turn back to talk to her just as he broke gazes with AJ.

"AJ?"

AJ shook her head to clear her thoughts before looking up slowly, finally seeing Draco's slightly reluctant, scowling face of repentance.

"I'm sorry, alright?" He mumbled, glaring down at the table as he began stabbing at his plate in anger, obviously humiliated at having to apologize to her in front of the other Slytherins.

Blaise raised an eyebrow, hiding a smirk to himself at Lila and Pansy's gaping jaws before he shrugged and rolled his eyes, turning back to pick at his plate.

AJ, despite herself, smiled warmly at Draco as she reached over and squeezed his hand, causing him to blink in surprise and look up at her loving gaze.

"Hey, I'm sorry too Draco... I didn't mean that... You *are* an insensitive jerk most of the time but I forgot that... well... You're *my* insensitive jerk now..." She whispered softly, smiling at the surprised sparkle in his eyes.

Harry watched; his eyes wide as Draco gave AJ a smug smile, raising her hand to his lips and pressing his lips tenderly against her palm in a kiss, this time definitely attracting a lot of attention from the other Slytherins around them.

AJ flushed and yanked her hand away only to face the oncoming wave of questions that the Slytherins, particularly Pansy and Lila, began firing at her in sudden curiosity.

"AJ, how could you?! What exactly was *that*?" Lila demanded, looking at her in betrayal before she finally let out a high-pitched gasp that made even the Gryffindors from the other table look their direction in curiosity.



"You...You whore, you *slept* with him didn't you?!" She accused angrily, her eyes tearing up as AJ pointedly looked away, ignoring the questions around her as she began picking listlessly at her plate.

Blaise and Harry both pointedly burst into hysterical laughter at the look on AJ's face, causing both Pansy and Lila to glare at them just as Draco hastily buried his red face in his hands, slouching in his seat.

"The day Malfoy gets into Ms. Potter's pants here is the day Crabbe and Goyle both go on a diet." Blaise mocked derisively, causing Draco's head to snap up and glare at him while the Slytherin guys around them burst into hearty laughter.

"Stuff it up your ass, you Hufflepuff loser!" Draco spat out angrily, causing Blaise to attempt lunging for him from across the table if AJ hadn't held him back by the collar, red as a tomato herself.

"If you guys have all finished discussing your disgusting sex-life, then I suggest keeping quiet before anything else *private* comes out." AJ said calmly, looking away from the rest of the Slytherins' peering grins.

"Oh come on, Potter... Don't think we don't know you. You're the only Slytherin girl left here who's still untouched and the reason Malfoy is so smitten with you is because he wants to be the first to experience *you*...It's disgusting of him really... I don't know what you see in such a jerk." Theodore Nott, another Slytherin proclaimed calmly, causing AJ to flush darker.

"Hey, stop talking about my sister as though she was some common whore! Anyone who dares to pursue his sick dreams about her and I swear, I will cut off your crotch! I do mean *anyone*." Harry burst out, glaring at Draco as well.

"You know Potter, one doesn't always need to defend a relative in such a rude and obtrusive manner. If you would lighten your vocabulary a bit—"

Nott never finished his sentence as, in an instant; Draco was up from his seat, holding Nott up by his collar while the other boy's feet dangled dangerously from the floor. "You should know when to keep

your mouth shut, Nott..." He whispered threateningly, causing the boy to stiffen in hidden fear as he saw Harry's eyes blazing on him as well.

"Come off it, Malfoy... You know the guy talk around here as well as we do. Theo's right. The only reason you're going for AJ here is because she's the only one who hasn't been touched by anyone else. We know you all too well." Another boy said said, sneering at him while Draco flushed darker in rage.

"Why you—"

"Draco!"

Draco stopped and looked at AJ as she gave him a small gentle smile of reassurance. "Never mind. Let it go, it's nothing. It's not like I don't how you other Slytherin boys think anyway." She said in a distant voice, coldly looking at Nott in warning.

Nott gave her a calm look of pity as Draco roughly set him down and turned away, disgusted to have the other boy in his sight. Just as he sat back down, he grabbed AJ's hand, causing the other girl to turn to him in surprise before he spoke.

"Don't mind this loser...He's probably just jealous because he knows I never plan on letting you go, Potter...*never*." He murmured, leaning over to caress his lips gently against hers, which caused their friends around them to erupt into cheers and catcalls.

AJ blinked and shoved him away in embarrassment, a scandalous look on her face which caused Draco to give out a superior laugh of amusement, both unaware of the glares some of the other students, Ron included, were giving them.

Smirking to himself, Harry sighed and raised his fork to his lips, feeling a rush of contentment well up inside him as he glanced around his wild but surprisingly welcoming surroundings.

*Looks like everything is going to turn out fine...If that's how they react with Draco and AJ coming out, I wonder how they'll react when they*

*find out about me and Hermione...* He thought smugly, chuckling to himself.

"Hey Potter..."

Harry looked up and met Draco's solemn gaze, his eyes coming together in question. "I uh... You... He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in thought. "About you and uh...Granger...I...I'll respect you about it...If you really care that much about her now...I...I won't tell anyone about our bet." He considered carefully, pondering his words.

Harry gave him a lopsided grin, nodding gratefully. "I appreciate that, Draco... Thank you. This means a lot to me." He admitted as Draco only smirked at him in response, rolling his eyes before he turned to talk to the Slytherin beside him.

"For Merlin's sake Lila, would you quit bawling like a damn child?!"

Harry sniggered at the irritated tone of his twin's voice before he turned and began talking to Crabbe beside him just as Lila cried harder, AJ finally exploding loudly soon after.

Harry fidgeted around impatiently, twiddling his fingers on his lap as he waited by the lake's edge where he sat comfortably under a tree, leaning against its trunk as he did.

Several of the Hogwarts students turned to look at the popular Slytherin in question as they passed him by from where they were all bustling out of the Hogwarts castle and lounging outside the grounds, studying in their daily hang-outs where they were found during break times.

Several of the girls gave him a charming smile as they passed him, greeting the well-known bachelor and playboy flirtatiously which Harry merely returned with a nod, smirking at them in amusement.

He barely noticed them at all, his eyes searching around the Hogwarts grounds for any sign of his Gryffindor, widening at every brunette that walked out of the castle, only to find out that it wasn't Hermione.

He had barely paid any attention to their morning classes that day, feeling a rush of nervousness ripple within him every time he thought about coming out in the open that afternoon.

It didn't help that the girls from all other houses seemed to be flirting more with him than usual, all of those whom he had dated before greeting him flirtatiously and others from Beauxbatons or Durmstrang asking him out. None of them mattered of course...It seemed none of them could compare to Hermione... He only had eyes for her now...

Draco had looked sickened when he had pointed that out loud absently but didn't respond, shaking his head in dismay.

He couldn't help but notice, however, the evil glint in Viktor Krum's eyes every time Harry had passed him in the Halls. Even some of Krum's Durmstrang friends seemed to sneer at him the same way with something gleaming in their eyes that made Harry narrow his own eyes in suspicion.

Something was up...He could feel it in his gut... He saw it in the way Krum's Durmstrang gang of friends leered at him... And he didn't trust it at all. He felt a strange sense of uneasiness whenever he saw them almost as though he could smell something fishy...He had better be on his guard now.

Also, it surprised to see that Parvati had also seemed cheerful that day as she had smiled at him in the Great Hall that morning, which Harry only returned with a cold, mocking sneer to mask the confusion he felt bubbling up inside him.

*Yup...Something was definitely up...* Harry thought, his face a blank mask of nonchalance as he leaned back against the tree trunk and sighed, biting his lip.

Beside him, Draco finally gave a soft snort of amusement from where he was resting his head lazily on AJ's lap as he stared off into the lake's horizon. AJ looked up from her Potions book, her eyes settling on Harry's troubled gaze.

"Are you okay Harry? You look like you just got engaged to Pansy Parkinson." She teased lightly, causing Harry to glare at her, raising his middle finger at her in annoyance.

AJ and Draco both laughed, Draco shaking his head and AJ turning back to her Potions book in silence, ignoring the unflattering words Harry was mumbling under his breath.

"Who are you looking for, anyway Harry? Looking around like a lost little boy searching for his mommy is not exactly a flattering appearance for you." Draco pointed out, smirking as he yawned and closed his eyes sleepily.

"I was just looking for Hermione...She said she'll be meeting me here around this time...Something about meeting up with a friend as well..." Harry answered easily, shrugging before looking up again as another horde of students exited the building.

Harry felt his heart leap up into his throat when he finally caught sight of her as she walked out of the castle with her usual stack of school books hugged to her chest. Seeing Harry there, she instantly smiled and made her way over to him, only to stop abruptly in uncertainty when she caught sight of Draco and AJ beside him.

Harry shook his head and gave her an encouraging nod, urging her silently to go forward but fortunately, AJ had taken a hint as she grabbed her bag and prodded Draco to get up, wanting to leave the couple alone to themselves.

Draco rolled his eyes but obliged, forcing himself up off the grass and gathering his schoolbooks just as Hermione reached them, a nervous look on her face.

"We're going now, Harry. See you later..." AJ said awkwardly, leaning down to give Harry a peck on the cheek before she walked off, not bothering to glance at Hermione as she did.

"Yeah, see you later Potter." Draco said, clapping Harry lightly on the back. He turned and gave Hermione one quick mocking sneer before he turned and followed after AJ, wrapping his arm possessively around the girl's waist.

Hermione sighed as she watched the couple go, collapsing next to Harry on the grass and burying her face in her hands dejectedly. "Look at that, Harry, they hated me...How can we even hope that everyone is going to accept us when—"

Harry smiled and silenced her with a soft kiss, his arms going around her and pulling her to him in a comforting embrace. "Don't mind those two, Hermione...They just need a little more time to get used to the idea of you and me. After all, we *were* enemies once...Just like you and my sister still are. It'll get better." He offered, shrugging as Hermione nodded reluctantly.

He turned away and had to smirk at the scandalized whispers and pointing students around them as they witnessed the scene...Harry Potter and Hermione Granger kissing...*Looks like that Skeeter woman wasn't all that wrong after all...* Harry thought, chuckling.

Nearby, he saw some of the other girls in their year gaping angrily at them with hanging jaws and flashing eyes, their arms crossed as they began whispering furiously to one another, no doubt something about Hermione.

"So the rumors *were* true then!"

"Harry's with *Granger*?! How could he like someone like her, this is an outrage!"

"I don't believe it... Harry Potter and Hermione Granger?!"

Harry couldn't help it, he burst out into a mischievous smirk as they heard the exclamations being thrown at them, causing Hermione to slap him lightly on the arm but smile despite herself.

"I give them one week before Harry tires of her and dumps her."

"What a sad waste...Harry could do so much better...Weren't they enemies before?"

"Good-for-nothing whore...Why couldn't she stay on her own turf and not mess with *our* men?"

"Maybe she's bewitched him somehow...A potion or something? There's no way Harry would like a mudblood like her! He hates her!"

The last harsh one had come from the Slytherin girls watching by the castle, Pansy glaring icily at Hermione with a dangerous glint in her eyes that caused a shiver to run down the Gryffindor's spine.

She felt a harsh stinging at the corner of her eyes at the painful comments but she held them back bravely, not wanting to show any signs of weakness to these girls mocking her.

*I'm strong than that...I won't let them get to me. Besides, Harry chose 'me'...He chose me over them which means I am much better than they are.* She thought, nodding to herself as she turned and gave the girls a challenging glare.

Harry watched her out of the corner of his eye, a smile breaking out slowly onto his handsome face as he saw the boldness in her eyes as she glared right back at Pansy, not at all showing any signs of intimidation.

"Don't mind them, Hermione...They're nothing anyway...Now, let's give them a show..." Harry suggested mischievously, raising his eyebrows up and down before he pulled her close and caught her lips in a deep, fiery kiss.

He barely managed to contain his laughter as he heard even louder exclamations around them, opening his eyes just in time to see Weasley's eyes roll back as he collapsed soon after, hitting the ground with a loud thud.

Hermione pulled back instantly, her eyes widening in concern but Harry had long gone into hysterics at that point, laughing at the horrified gaping Seamus and the equally dumbstruck Crabbe and Goyle who were scratching their heads in confusion.

He was surprised to see, however, that some Gryffindor girls were watching them in amusement, their eyes looking awed at the tender scene. Both Lavender Brown and Ginny Weasley seemed to be smiling at Hermione, both obviously happy for their friend yet slightly envious at the same time.

In fact, the only Slytherins who probably weren't rubbing their eyes in disbelief were Draco and AJ, both Slytherins sitting near another shade with Draco definitely more... *preoccupied* with a blushing AJ than with anyone else.

Hermione had to laugh and swatted Harry's arm playfully, shaking her head. "You didn't have to out us *that* way you know... You could have at least let me tell Ron and Seamus the way you told Draco and your sister." She pointed out in mild irritation but Harry just grinned, shrugging.

"Where' the fun in that?" He replied, winking before pulling her close again, both of them now completely unaware of the stares being directed at them as they met each other's eyes.

Harry gently stroked the side of Hermione's face, pressing his forehead against hers in a long, tender silence before he leaned down and nuzzled her silky soft cheek, inhaling her sweet scent.

Hermione smiled at the action and kissed him lightly on the cheek before wrapping her own arms around him, resting her head on his chest as she closed her eyes in contentment.

"I love you..." Hermione whispered, feeling her entire body begin to melt in Harry's strong arms but Harry held her tightly against him, responding to her by squeezing her slightly before he kissed her neck.

The girls watching couldn't believe they eyes at the action...Frankly they had never seen Harry being this gentle with any girl before...He had always seemed so dangerously powerful and dominant when he handled them, always sure of what he wanted and certain he would get it.

This new side of Harry was almost hard to even imagine...Eyes sparkling with a rare sense of gentleness and love when he looked at Hermione, his sneer transforming instantly into a sincere smile when he saw her...It seemed he had unleashed his soft side with her and that alone was enough to drive some of the other girls in anger.

Harry pulled away from Hermione with a smile on his face, taking a moment to turn and flash a cold sneer at some of the Gryffindors



gaping at them before he leaned over and tilted Hermione's face to meet his, a solemn look on his face.

"Hermione...I...I want to talk to you about something..." He blurted out nervously, biting his lip as the bet he and Draco had flashed into his mind. Hermione fused her eyes delicately together in question before nodding silently, her coffee-brown eyes watching him with rapt attention.

"Can't it wait, Harry? See, we're supposed to be waiting for someone right now, I promised her we'd meet up with her around this time, she said she wanted to talk to us." She said, checking her watch before glancing around for any sign of Parvati.

Harry shook his head, leaning forward and grabbing her hands to divert her attention back to his face. "No, this is important, I uh..." He coughed and bit his lip, unsure of what he was going to say or how he was going to start.

Harry found himself gazing into those brown orbs, not knowing what to say as his mind drew a perfect blank, annoying him as he struggled to find his words. "Er... See...Um...Before anything else though, I promise Hermione that I would never hurt you again and that from this day on, no matter what happens, I will always protect and fight for you against *anyone* that dares to come between us...I—"

"How sweet...Do those promises include something about truth and honesty, Potter?" A coarse, harsh voice interrupted, causing both Harry and Hermione to glance up and see the leering face of Viktor Krum as he stood over them, his eyes glinting coldly.

Hermione didn't seem to notice the cold tone in Krum's words as she looked up and gave him a friendly smile before glancing around again, looking for Parvati amidst the students around them. "Hey Viktor, you haven't by any chance seen Parvati around have you? She said she was going to meet us here by this time." She said, causing Harry to stiffen in surprise.

"Patil?! Hermione, why the *fuck* would we be meeting Patil?!" Harry exploded all of a sudden, his eyes widening in anger as he stared at Hermione accusingly.

"What's wrong, Potter? Afraid of meeting up with an old girlfriend? Or are you just worried you might find yourself coming on to Parvati again since you're half pretty much finished with Hermione... *Hermione* now anyway... The bet's been done hasn't it?" Krum suddenly taunted, his eyes glowing strangely.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm as all the color rushed out of his face, barely registering Hermione's innocently curious gaze at the two of them. "What do you mean, Krum?" He asked in a deadly silent whisper, his eyes looking frantic, causing Krum to laugh derisively in amusement.

"Oh come on now, Potter... Do you honestly expect me to believe this little '*coming out*' of yours is something sincere? Out with it now, you just put up this little show to inform others of your victory so that when you broke the news to Her...mione, you'd get more glory and praise on your success. And victory always is sweeter when you've made a fool out of your enemy, am I right?" He asked again, this time causing Harry to slam his fist against the ground.

"Uhm... Harry, what is he talking about?" Hermione asked uncertainly, her voice shaking and her eyes looking nervously confused and fearful as she carefully considered Krum's words.

Harry ignored her, his face instantly transforming back into his menacing sneer of hatred and warning, his eyes flashing a violent shade of green before he instantly stood up and met Krum's gaze, not at all willing to be pushed around by the slightly taller boy.

Hermione felt her heart pounding nervously in her chest as she saw the familiar glint of maniacal anger in Harry's eyes, shuddering at the frighteningly cold look on his handsome face.

It was in specific moments like this one that she could never forget the fact that her boyfriend, sweet or not, was *still* the notorious leader of the Slytherins and was still Harry Potter, one half of the Slytherin duo.

And like it or not, Harry was still the same guy whom most of the boys in their year feared for his dangerous wrath of anger and violence when provoked even by the slightest comment... She knew that look

in his eye...And she had a feeling something was going to break out if she didn't try to put a stop to it.

"Harry—"

She began but both Harry and Krum seemed to ignore her, their eyes blazing scarily into the other's as Harry stepped forward until they were nearly eye to eye. Hermione watched with wide eyes as Harry sneered once more, looking at Krum in loathing.

"Unless you've got something *intelligent* to say to my face, I suggest you sod off right now before I lose it and whip you into oblivion. You wouldn't want to mess with me...I'm sure everyone here can affirm to that." He drawled calmly, his eyes never leaving Krum's gaze.

Krum narrowed his eyes at that, his hands slowly tightening themselves into deadly fists.

"I'm not afraid of conceited jerk like you, Potter! You're all talk anyway...Always used to having those useless friends of yours around to protect you...Vell let's see how you match up viz-out zem now...Let's see how you match up viz-out your wand..." He hissed darkly, smirking as he held up the gleaming object in his hand that was no doubt, Harry's wand.

Harry's eyes instantly widened in alarm as his hands besieged his robe pockets, not wanting to believe that the other boy had gotten hold of it. "My wand...H-how...You sick pathetic coward, how did you get my wand?!" He demanded angrily, his eyes darkening to a chilly shade of black.

Krum gave a light laugh, shaking his head at the Slytherin in mock sadness. "How easy it vos, really... You shouldn't be so careless when you walk the corridors, Potter... You wouldn't believe how incredibly easy it vos to steal from you." He said darkly, a cold, sadistic look on his face as several more Durmstrang students began circling around them, enclosing both Harry and Hermione in a tight circle away from the other students' eyes.

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly as well, his form and muscles tensing in anticipation as he watched Krum and his friends circle around him

dangerously, keeping a calm look on his face as he stood there unmoving like a statue, his eyes following their every move.

"So this is it, Krum? What is this...A gang-up? A gang-up on a wandless, *single* fellow champion? How pathetic... Aren't you even man enough to fight me on your own?" Harry asked snidely, his voice cold and unforgiving while his face showed no sign of fear or intimidation, merely sneering at them all in anger.

Krum laughed at his boldness, both impressed and annoyed at the same time at how Harry didn't seem to be afraid of the fact that he was being surrounded, *without* his wand, and circled by six Durmstrang students, all of which seeming to be larger than he was.

Hermione bit her lip and rushed forward, trying to position herself in front of Harry but a pair of female hands had grabbed her from behind and had thrown her back, dragging her roughly outside the circle.

"Now now, Hermione... Don't be a spoilsport... Watch the fun, you might even enjoy it. After all, it's not everyday you get to have revenge against the guy who dared to play you like a fool...Maybe *you* should even take the first swing at *him*. And don't worry; you can thank me later for setting him up like this." A voice said innocently, causing Hermione to whirl around and meet Parvati's smirking face as she batted her eyelashes innocently at her.

Hermione's eyes finally flashed as she glared at her, her face twisting into a furious scowl of anger. "Parvati, would just tell me what the *fuck* you're talking about?! Would you tell me what *all* of you are talking about?!" She screamed at them, whirling around again to face Harry.

Harry looked at her with a somber expression, his eyes downcast and his face miserably ashamed as he turned away, hiding his eyes from her own questioning glare. "Harry...Would you care to tell me what they're talking about?" She asked again, her voice cold and harsh.

Harry winced at her tone and looked up from the ground, ignoring the leering faces circled around him as he locked gazes with Hermione again, a painful burning rising up in his chest that made his heart clench at the betrayed look in her eyes.

"Hermione...I'm...I'm sorry, I..."

"You don't deserve her, Potter! You never did! Not after vot you haff done to her! I vill make you pay for daring to hurt her, you bastard!" Krum raged, cutting Harry off just as Parvati giggled and whirled Hermione around to face her again, an evil sadistic grin on her face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Krum?!" Another voice had shouted, interrupting them as they all turned to see an enraged Draco striding over to them, a hateful snarl on his features directed at the group of Durmstrang students around his best friend.

Parvati felt another glimmer of repugnance as she sneered at him, not releasing her firm, painful grip on Hermione's arm as she only yanked the other Gryffindor's hair in response, causing Hermione to cry out in pain.

"Don't you hurt her, you filthy little slut!" Harry had exploded furiously, causing a Durmstrang boy to step forward and slam his fist right into Harry's face in retaliation, making the Slytherin stumble back in pain, his eyes shut.

"Stop it!" AJ had screamed from where she stood a couple of feet away from them, her eyes widening in worry as she saw her brother's grimace of pain.

"Aw...How sweet...Such a strong bond of friendship...I never knew you were such a sap, Malfoy." Krum had spat out snidely, giving Draco a mocking sneer as Draco's face twisted into a mask of anger, his silver eyes darkening dangerously.

"No one talks to me, like that Krum...*No one*..." Draco had threatened warningly, his hands slowly closing into tight fists as his muscles tensed in anticipation.

Krum gave a curt nod to several more group of Durmstrang students behind Draco, causing AJ's eyes to widen as she made to rush forward to help him but Parvati only smirked as her group of Ravenclaw friends held her back from behind.

"Let me go, dammit!" AJ snapped at Padma Patil, her eyes narrowing but Padma only laughed at her, tightening her arms around AJ's painfully, keeping the girl from rushing forward to the scene in front of them.

Hermione watched all this with a rapidly pounding heart, her breathing coming in fast shallow gasps as she watched it all take place before her like some kind of scene she was being forced to watch, everything happening so fast it was hard to tell what was going to happen next.

Harry was still glaring silently at Krum with a cold, lecherous gleam in his emerald green eyes, his shoulders rising with every breath he took while Krum easily glared back, a look of pure unadulterated hatred on his face.

"You...Krum...Patil...What exactly are you two trying to prove with this?? What do you want?" Harry seethed, gritting his teeth as he barely managed to contain his fury, his fingernails digging deep into his palms it was painful.

"What does every girl, want Harry?" Parvati answered back cheerfully, giving Harry a smile as she raised an eyebrow and blew him a mocking kiss, causing Harry to snap and lunge for her again but another guy had shoved him back roughly onto the ground.

"Hey—" Draco made to help him but that's when the group of guys behind him had held him back, causing him to struggle against them violently in anger but they proved too many for him to be able to fight back.

Hermione's jaw had dropped open in horror and concern, almost pushing through the circle of students to help Harry but she knew better, watching Harry rise back up boldly onto his feet with a smirk on his face.

"Was that the best you can do? Why I've had worse from a girl—" Harry stopped midsentence when another fist came flying at his mouth, this time catching him off guard as he stumbled slightly again, struggling to keep his balance.

Draco struggled wildly with his captors again, knowing full well that his best friend was foolish enough to keep on defending his pride rather than to consider his own condition. Given the chance, Harry could very well be beaten to death and he still wouldn't give in to submitting his pride.

AJ bit her lip from where she watched him until she tasted blood, feeling her heart jumping up and down her rib cage as she watched her brother being literally manhandled by the group of guys around him.

Again, Harry looked up and met their gazes easily, the mocking smirk still on his lips, ignoring the trickle of blood that now ran down his chin from his broken lip and the pain he felt in the bruises on his face.

"Interesting...I—" His face snapped away again as another fist, this time Krum's himself had made contact with his eye, finally causing Hermione to snap as she felt her eyes stinging with tears.

"Stop it! Leave him alone, Viktor, please!" She pleaded, now openly crying as she watched Harry feebly getting up again, nothing escaping his mouth but a stubborn chuckle as he glared at them in weak amusement.

Parvati had yanked her hair back roughly again, this time pulling her away from the circle to turn her around again, her eyes flashing maniacally, scaring Hermione at the wild look in her eyes.

"You *still* choose to care about him so much, Granger?! After all he's done to play you like a stupid, worthless little fool?! How stupid are you really, Hermione?! Are you really going to let him get away with what he did?" She hissed angrily, her face an ugly scowl of resentment.

Hermione averted her teary eyes from Harry's pleading look at her to Parvati's cold gaze, feeling a rush of fear overcome her as she dared to speak up again. "Wha-what..What do you mean Parvati?" She whispered

Parvati smiled scornfully in response before she turned her head and gestured to Harry, who was looking desperately at the two of them with a lost look in his eyes that indicated his nervousness.

"You see that guy over there? He played you. He played you just as he played me...And all the other girls in this whole bloody school for that matter. He's nothing but a scheming, conniving, lying bastard who cares about nothing else but getting into a girl's pants." Parvati said, giving Harry a disgusted look.

"But you're wrong, Harry is not like that, he's—"

Parvati laughed, cutting her off as she turned and shoved Hermione forward to see the guilty look on Harry's face, his eyes dropping down onto the ground in dismay.

"Is *that* the look of someone who is not what I just said he is? Look at him Hermione...Look at his eyes...Those big, pretty eyes...The eyes that you...That *I*, that every other girl fell in love with. Look right into his eyes and ask him yourself." She dared, shoving her forward.

Hermione stumbled but kept her gaze on Harry's shining emerald-green orbs, fighting back a wave of emotions that were threatening to overcome her as she managed to give him a small encouraging look.

"Harry... Is she...Is she telling the truth?" She asked softly, watching as Harry's eyes lowered, refusing to look at her when he answered.

"Hermione, I—I meant to tell you...I just—"

"You see? He hasn't changed at all...He's just the same as he always is. A cruel-hearted bastard who cares about no one else but himself and getting his way all the time! A guy like him doesn't deserve to be loved! He deserves to be trampled on! To punish him with magic is far too dignified for such vermin like him... No, he deserves to be trampled *physically* on for all the pain he's caused us..." Parvati said, her tone bitter as she turned sharply away.

Draco bit his lip, watching as Hermione didn't remove her gaze from Harry's forlorn face, her eyes looking almost desperately disbelieving



as though she wanted to continue to believe that Parvati was just making everything up.

"Harry...Tell me... What is she talking about?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer but Parvati had rushed forward and grabbed Hermione by the hair again, yanking her back to face her with a scarily sadistic smile on her face.

"You want to know what I'm talking about? I'll tell you what I'm talking about! It all has something to do with one dangerously sexy Harry Potter, one dangerously challenging Draco Malfoy and one *dangerous* bet they made at the beginning of the year." She announced loudly to herself.

Harry and Draco both paled while AJ sucked in her breath, knowing full well what the other girl was talking about. She had heard both Harry and Draco talk about the bet so many times before when she had been sleeping and it had shocked her, to say the least, that they had dared to attempt toying with someone's emotions like that...

"Patil, don't do this. This doesn't involve us...*any* of us here...You don't have the right to be messing in something that doesn't involve you..." AJ pleaded quietly, causing Parvati to acknowledge her briefly with a mocking sneer before she walked forward and slapped the girl right in the cheek in anger.

"Bitch—" Draco managed as he struggled furiously with his captors but Parvati ignored him, giving AJ a hateful snarl.

"This has *everything* to do with me, Potter! Everything to do with me!! It's been that way ever since I fell in love with that disgusting animal you call a brother!" She screamed at her, pointing maniacally at Harry.

"Hermione doesn't have anything to do with that problem of yours and neither does Harry. Neither does *anyone*. Let. Us. Go." AJ spoke again calmly, wincing when Parvati rounded hysterical eyes to her again.

"Wrong again, Ms. *Perfect!* *Au contraire*, Hermione Granger has every *fucking* thing to do with this!! Every *fucking* thing!" She

screamed again, turning back to grab Hermione by the front of her robes.

*What a horrible way for it to come out...* AJ thought in horror, watching as Parvati shook Hermione violently with her fists, causing the other girl to stiffen in horror as Parvati managed to speak in a harsh, cold whisper.

"Did you honestly think Harry would just suddenly take a personal interest in you just like that? Frankly, you never really *were* his type anyway, weren't you? And that was exactly the point! It had all been a dare...A bet set-up by Malfoy here in which he challenged Harry to seduce you and make you fall in love with him despite the fact that you weren't his like his usual conquests and that you were enemies." Parvati said, causing all the blood to rush out of Hermione's face.

"*Patil!*" AJ started out again but Parvati was obviously not going to let her interrupt, continuing on with her enraged explanation.

"And he really had you fooled too, didn't he? Look at the lengths you went through for him...He's a pretty conniving asshole if I may say so... He even had *you*, Hermione Granger, the smartest most conservative girl I know, fooled. Amazing isn't it? The things he goes through for a good lay." She continued, laughing spitefully.

Hermione felt her eyes tearing up instantly with hot tears, her vision blurring as she felt a deep, painful burning in her chest at Parvati's words, her whole body trembling as she barely managed to contain the sobs that were threatening to spill out.

"I really hate to be the one to break it to you Hermione but as your caring friend, I only wanted you to know the truth... It was all an act, dearie... Everything... All his words, his promises, his kisses...All just an act. He never really cared about you...It was all part of his manipulative plan to prove himself strong to Malfoy and to get you into the sack..." Parvati added, enjoying herself immensely as she watched Hermione's face crumple with every word.

"Stop it, Parvati!" AJ yelled out, her face going pale as well just as the said girl laughed, ignoring AJ's cries once again as her cold eyes never left the crushed, heartbroken look on Hermione's face.

"Do you get it now, Hermione? That's all you ever were to him. A conquest...One of his greatest challenges—bedding his Gryffindor rival...It was all a scheme to uphold his reputation even more. What a victory it probably be for him... Hermione *perfect* Granger brought down and humiliated by the person she hates the most..." Parvati finished in a dead whisper, causing Krum's eyes to narrow in anger.

"Potter, you good-for-nothing jerk! How dare you hurt her zat vay!" He raged but Harry barely heard him, his glassy eyes focused on Hermione, who had finally collapsed weakly onto her knees inside the circle in front of him, her eyes wide but her expression emotionless as she spoke.

"Please tell me it's not true, Harry." Was all she said, her voice so soft and inaudible but Harry cringed at the emptiness of it, not used to having Hermione speak to him that way before he weakly collapsed onto his knees as well, not having the strength to stand.

He couldn't respond, merely looking at her and holding her gaze, waiting until Hermione's face suddenly appeared horrible crushed as she finally raised a fist and punched Harry right in the face herself, the sobs now escaping her body violently.

"Y-you...You lying, two-faced *bastard!*" She screamed, collapsing onto him weakly as she continued to punch him as hard as she could but Harry didn't move at all, enduring her punches silently as tears silently rolled down his cheeks.

"H-how could you?! I-I...I-I trust you! You...I...I loved you! You...You I-led me on, dammit! I hate you, Harry, I *fucking hate you!!*" She screamed again, crying hysterically with trembling, nerve-wracking sobs as she pounded her fists against Harry's chest.

Harry didn't answer, only crying openly as he endured her punches, feeling all the guilt and misery he had been holding inside break out and pour out of him uncontrollably at the sight of seeing the betrayed look on Hermione's face.

"Hermione, I—I'm sorry, I—I meant t-to tell you, I just...I couldn't f-find the courage...I was scared, I—" Harry reached forward to clasp her

hand but Hermione yanked it away and used it to slap his cheek in disgust and hysterical anger.

"Don't you touch me, Harry! Don't you fucking ever touch me again!" She screamed at him, shoving him away as she made to stand up and run away but Harry had clutched desperately onto her arm, his eyes pleading as he stared at her.

"Hermione, *please*, It may have started out that way but I—"

"Let go of me, Harry, you disgust me! I never want to touch you, speak to you or see you ever again!" She spat out, struggling to move away but Harry was unrelenting, grasping her hand tightly in his.

"Hermione, listen to me, I lov—"

Harry stopped what he was saying when Hermione had raised a fist and had punched him right in the eye, causing him to stumble onto the ground just as she pushed her way out of the circle, attempting to run back to the castle but Parvati had grabbed her again, stopping her dead in her tracks.

"Hold on a minute there, Hermione...I want to make sure you don't miss the show." She said evilly, her eyes glinting as the Durmstrang students circled in on Harry again, closing in on him but the Slytherin didn't seem to care anymore, picking himself up off the ground weakly.

Draco watched with a worried look on his face as Harry forced himself upright yet again, a stubborn look in his eye as he looked at the guys around him in the eye one by one, not bothering to wipe the trail of blood on his face as he managed another taunting sneer at them.

AJ was crying now as she struggled hysterically with her captors, her eyes tearing up at the sight of her brother all battered and beaten in front of her like that. She couldn't bear to watch...She had to do something... She couldn't handle seeing Harry like this...

"Have at me then... Beat me until you are satisfied... You will never bring me down." Harry whispered weakly, glaring at them as Krum's eyes flashed again, looking incredibly pissed off at his words.

"You are asking for a death wish, Potter..." Krum growled, his hands tightening as he watched Harry turn again, this time to look at Hermione in the eye.

Hermione glared at him as anguished sobs continued to escape her trembling body, her vision blurry and her cheeks wet with tears but she held her head up high, meeting his gaze with anger and utmost hatred filled with pain and betrayal.

"Hermione... Before anything...I...I want you to know... It *wasn't* all a lie..." Harry said softly, his eyes shining with a strange sense of sincerity and honesty as they continued to leak tears down his cheeks.

Her breathing hitched in her throat as she felt Parvati's hands tense in annoyance, watching Harry silently as he weakly forced himself to continue, ignoring the stares from all the other students around them.

"I'll admit...It *had* been a bet from the start...I had set my sights into bringing you down...All that had been true...But you remember that night in the Astronomy tower?" Harry asked, urging one corner of his lip into a soft, gentle smile.

Hermione didn't answer him, looking away as she felt another rush of tears begin to escape her eyes but she listened to him intently, ignoring the harsh whispers she could hear from all around them.

"Something had happened that day...Something magical yet something that had scared me... I saw something in you I never saw in any other girl...Something I had been afraid of from the very start which is why I have always pushed you away...You made me feel something I never thought I could ever be capable of feeling..." He whispered, his vision blurring.

The people around him fell into an uneasy silence, carefully taking in the Slytherin's words yet maintaining a look of disbelief on their face

as though they couldn't or rather...*wouldn't* believe the words that were coming out of his mouth.

"I don't know if it had been your charms...your innocence or your beauty...but you had caught me that night, Hermione. It had all been different after that...I started to get to know you...And I let you get to know more of the Harry Potter I never let any other girl I dated see before...I didn't know how any of it had happened but more and more, I found myself starting to fall in love with you..." He spoke softly, keeping his eyes on the ground.

At this, Pansy and her group of Slytherin girls had gasped in response, their carefully made up eyes going wide with horror as they dared not believe the scene in front of them. The sight of them was almost enough for AJ to break out into a small smile.

"I panicked and tried to avoid it of course but you know all about that. And as much as I tried to fight it, the more it kept coming back to me... The more I got to know you, the more I wanted to get to know you... You had some special kind of magic that had me enthralled more and more each day. I couldn't even understand myself anymore...Being with you just made me feel so happy that I forced myself to forget about the bet... It didn't matter to me anymore." Harry murmured, burying his face in his hands.

"Dat is enough drama, Potter—" Krum tried to interrupt but Harry spoke on, desperately trying to rush out the words before anyone got to interrupt him again, his eyes never leaving Hermione's tear-streaked face.

"Th-that night at the Yule Ball...I...I realized that you were more to me now than just some measly conquest...More than just another girl to add to my list... You were special Hermione...I have never lied to you about that... It had all started out that way but I soon ate all my words right back. I...I had fallen for you...And I was too coward to face it...To admit it to myself that you had become a part of me. I guess it had hurt my pride too much that you had turned the tables against me." Harry said bitterly, shaking his head.

"Oh please, Potter—" Parvati drawled, rolling her eyes at him but inside, her heart felt as though it was going to break, every word the raven-haired Slytherin spoke like a dagger through her gut.

"If you want to hurt me now because of what I've done...Go on ahead... If I've committed something worth being punished for then let them hit me with every sin I've done...for every lie I've spoken, every time I've hurt you, every time I've hurt like a pathetic coward from my own feelings...Everything...But please, if there's one thing I'm not sorry for, it's the fact that I love you Hermione... Please don't hit me for that because I have no regrets about the day I fell in love with you." He finished, finally looking up to see Hermione crying at his words.

"My god..." AJ murmured under her breath, her eyes leaking continuously at having heard such a loving, wonderfully spoken speech from her brother.

"Please Hermione...I've always been a coward...I was never brave as you always were...But I speak the truth now...I love you so damn much that I'd give anything for you. I would never break all I've promised to you that day by the lake... Yes, it had all rooted from that stupid bet but then again, I'm thankful. If it wasn't for that bet, I would never have gotten the chance to love you." Harry managed, his eyes silently begging her to understand.

Hermione just stared back blankly at him, her eyes wet with tears but otherwise devoid of any emotion at all, merely staring back at him like to empty orbs that barely saw what lay before them at all.

"You were the most beautiful, purest and most innocent girl I had ever met...You taught me things I never thought I could ever learn... And if you choose to hate me now...I'll understand...But...Thank you Hermione...Thank you for loving the unlovable...Thank you for loving me." Harry whispered silently his voice so soft most of the students around didn't hear him but Hermione heard it clearly, the words echoing in her head.

AJ watched Harry, her eyes clouding over as she cried out openly at hearing Harry's touching and tender words. He really *did* love her after all... His words...His words had touched right through her heart

and the gentleness in his tone had nearly caused her to lose it and break down altogether.

After all these years, she had thought that Harry would have never learned to love someone that way, having experienced all they had with people that have never shown them how to love anyone in the first place.

But...Now... He had openly admitted to Hermione that he loved her...In front of *everyone*, regardless of what happened to his reputation... It was more than enough to prove how he felt... But Hermione didn't seem to be relenting, staring at him as though he was a creature she had never seen before.

Krum, who had been awed by the sincerity of Harry's speech, finally blinked and shook his head, starting forward to grab Harry by the collar. "Alright Potter, that is enough wiz your drama and your crappy lies... Hermione does not buy zem anymore." He remarked, shoving Harry roughly away.

Harry didn't fight back, keeping his eyes firmly trained on Hermione as Parvati glared at the two of them, her own eyes watering as she felt the pain in hearing Harry's words. "Pummel him! Pummel him now! And if he dares to fight back, I'll have some of my friends pummel Granger as well!" She shrieked at Krum, angry at Harry for hurting her once again. Grunting, she yanked Harry's wand out of Krum's hand, an evil glint in her eye as she did.

Harry watched with resigned, hopeless eyes as Parvati yanked Hermione's limp body towards hers and fisted her hair, making sure Harry saw that she had pointed his own wand at her throat before she spoke again. "You wouldn't want *pretty little* Hermione to be hurt now, would you Harry?" She spat out, her face twisted angrily.

"I'm sorry, Hermione..." Harry whispered just as the boys around him stepped forward again, murderous gleams and sneers on their faces.

"Harry, don't do it! Fight back you bloody git!" Draco had cursed at him as he attempted to shove away those holding him back, looking on in panic as Harry only shook his head, giving him a weak, comforting smirk.



"Close your eyes, Hermione..." Was all he said before he shut his own eyes right before a fist came flying at his face again. Stumbling onto the ground in pain, he shielded his head with his arms as he felt the boys finally close in on him, feeling nothing but pain as the fists, rough shoes and limbs kept flying at his defenseless form.

"*Harry!!*" AJ screamed as she stared in horror at the scene in front of her. Harry was there, huddled onto the floor like a child, curling himself in pain as the boys continued to stomp and punch at his battered and broken body, yelling out harsh and crude insults as they did.

Hermione finally blinked and watched as Harry refused to make any sound at all, shaking and trembling on the floor while he endured the punches, kicks and stomps that rained down onto his bloody form, a trickle of blood now running down the side of his face.

*Harry...* She thought, her eyes flooding as she saw this boy...This boy she loved being beaten helplessly by the group of boys around him and yet, he was refusing to cry out in pain, enduring all of this for her...Enduring all of this and not fighting back for fear of her getting involved...

*Harry Potter...One of the feared and most powerful wizards in the school...He's practically invincible...No one can touch him...and here he is, being beaten relentlessly all because he doesn't want to fight them back...All because of me...* She thought, feeling her heart clench painfully in her.

It was at that very moment that all of it came flooding back at her...All of the memories... Their first kiss...That night in the Astronomy tower...Their first date... The first time they had made love...That dance they shared the night in the Yule Ball... Harry's gentle smile as he held her in his arms... The way his eyes sparkled just for her when he laughed...

It was hard to believe that the same boy who had done all that was the one being beaten up now, lying there bleeding and broken on the ground in front of her. This was the boy she loved she was watching get hurt... This was Harry...But it couldn't be...He was...She...

Hermione closed her eyes, briefly remembering the words Harry had spoken to her that day when they had been in the lake.

*"All those times I hurt you in the past...All that shit I put you through...You never deserved any of it, Hermione. I know that know...And I would do everything now, everything in my right, to fight for you. I'd endure anything for you just so you wouldn't get hurt again... I love you too damn much..."*

*And he does love me... He loves me...That's all that matters now... That's all that ever mattered... He may have done some crappy mistakes in the past and this might top them all but...I love him... I don't want to lose him again.* She thought, finally snapping her attention back to them.

"Stop it!! All of you, leave him alone! Stop it!" Hermione screamed, now suddenly struggling with Parvati to rush forward and help him but they ignored her, stopping for a brief moment to let her see Harry's battered, nearly unconscious body.

Draco was watching his best friend sadly now, his silver eyes clouding over as he took in Harry's condition. It was like AJ's dream all over again... In his mind, as he watched Harry lying there on the ground being beaten up relentlessly over and over and over again...

The image of the seven-year-old Harry had returned...Harry crying on the floor as his muggle relatives continued to beat him as punishment while AJ watched, sobbing... It was coming back now... This time it was Hermione in AJ's place who was the cause of him being hurt... Of him not fighting back..

He watched as Parvati shoved Hermione against some of her other friends before she walked forward to Harry's form herself, a crazy smile on her face.

Krum watched as she slowly crouched down to stroke Harry's bloody cheek, causing Harry to snap his eyes open and glare at her in anger, his eyes a mixture of pent-up pain and grief.

"Does it hurt now, Harry? Do you understand what pain is?" She taunted, her eyes glowing eerily as she stared down at him,

sadistically raising Harry's wand up to press it hard against the boy's throat.

Harry didn't respond, his eyes looking almost child-like as he stared up at her, whispering something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "slut", causing Parvati to snap and raise a hand, slapping him hard again as he winced but managed a bloody laugh, smirking at her as he did.

She watched, stepping back in horror as Harry forced himself to stand up again, looking as though he would have collapsed any minute in weakness but he managed to get himself upright, looking back up to meet Krum's stunned gaze, his face bloody but taunting at him.

Slowly, he turned and met Hermione's gaze, managing a small smile as she looked at him, eyes leaking continuously at the sight of so much blood on him before Harry turned again and met AJ's own teary eyes from where she stood, marveling at how those eyes seemed to reflect his own...*pain*...

Parvati hissed in anger and flicked Harry's wand to produce a large bat, which she handed to Krum with a hateful snarl on his features, her eyes focused intently on Harry. "Here, hit the bastard with this." She said coldly, narrowing her eyes but Krum looked slightly alarmed.

"But Parvati, I—"

"I said hit him with the bat, Krum!" She screamed at him, her eyes blazing in explosion as Krum jumped in surprise. Harry watched them with a blank face, not at all intimidated by the bat in Krum's grip.

Then, with a slow smirk, he looked at Krum again, coughing up blood for a minute before he opened his mouth to speak again. "Well? You heard what the bitch said...Give it your best shot... I've felt worse from a bite of a flobberworm..." He taunted, causing Krum's face to flame in rage again, his grip tightening on the bat.

"Well? What are you waiting for...Do it..." Harry taunted again as he fell on his knees in front of him, his whole body nearly giving out at the loss of so much blood.

Krum didn't need telling twice. With a look of anger on his face, he rushed forward and made to aim at Harry's face with the bat tightly held above his hand, the heavy weapon deadly as it came down onto the young Slytherin in front of him.

However, what had happened next had shocked even him... Hermione had finally shoved past her captors, ignoring Parvati's angry scream as she literally threw herself in front of Harry's form, the large bat snapping in two against her tender skin as she made to cover Harry's body with her own.

Krum instantly dropped the remaining half of the bat, his eyes going wide with horror as he eyed the expression of pain on Hermione's face before she buried her face onto Harry's blood-soaked shirt, her arms moving to wrap around the raven-haired Slytherin.

AJ found that she couldn't move or speak as she watched the scene with a whole new sense of...sense of joy and happiness... *She loves him...My god, she really loves him...* She realized sadly, looking at the Gryffindor with a strange respect and compassion.

The brave action touched her greatly, having never witnessed such an instance wherein a girl had shown so much love for Harry much more than just what they were willing to give... If anything, she knew now that the love Hermione felt for Harry was real... Deeper and stronger than all the other girls he had dated in the past...

If anything, Hermione's courage and selfless love touched her as well and she found now, watching Hermione stroking Harry gently with teary eyes, she fond now she would gladly accept Hermione now... It seemed she had deemed the girl wrong after all...

"H-Herm—own...*Hermione*...I'm sorry, I—I—" Krum stopped midsentence when Draco finally broke loose from one of the grips holding him and he lunged forward, slamming his fist right into Krum's jaw in retaliation.

"Noo!!" Parvati screamed as she watched Draco and Krum break out into a violent fight, her eyes widening in wild anger. She growled under her breath and rushed towards the Harry's bleeding form, her fingers tightening icily around the wand in her hand.

"Move over, Granger... Move over and let me finish the fucking job." She hissed but she was surprised, however, to see Hermione's suddenly pissed off face as the girl finally turned around and raised a hand at her.

"What—"

Parvati didn't get to finish as she found Hermione's fist making harsh contact with her face with a sickening *SMACK*, causing her to fall back instantly onto the ground, her nose bleeding.

"You *bitch!* I should have done this a long time ago!" Hermione spat out, raising a fist again and this time, making direct contact with Parvati's eye, causing the girl to screech out in pain.

"You stupid bitch, I—"

She stopped again when Hermione punched her once more, finally causing the wild Gryffindor to cry out in pain and collapse onto the ground, clutching her bruised and bleeding face.

Hermione surprised herself when she let out a smirk and turned around, going back to wrap her arms protectively around Harry just as the boy weakly coughed up another round of blood.

AJ couldn't comprehend what happened next... It seemed a whole brawl had broken out amongst them, most of the Slytherin boys around surprisingly lunging forward to help their leader as they began taking action against the Durmstrang students around them.

The girls holding AJ screamed in fear and ran away from the scene, allowing AJ to rush forward to Harry's weakly breathing body from where Hermione held him in her arms. "Nice punching, Granger..." She managed, causing the girl to freeze in surprise.

Looking up, Hermione locked gazes with AJ, both girls staring at each other in an awkward silence before AJ looked away and looked at Harry's form, her eyes nearly tearing up again when she saw the now unhidden pain in his eyes.

She reached forward and gently stroked his hair, her hand shaking slightly as she did. "Harry?" She whispered, biting her lip as Harry finally turned to look at her, his eyes big and lost as a seven-year-old child's.

"Please make the pain go away...It hurts so much... I promise not to be a bad boy anymore... I'm not a bad child...I'm not..." He whispered before his eyes finally rolled over and he lost consciousness altogether, his body finally giving in to the pain he had been enduring for so long.

AJ buried her head in her hands, crying softly while Hermione held Harry tenderly, stroking the boy's head as she fought to keep her own tears from falling again. She felt that she had cried enough... Crying wouldn't help them solve anything...

Around them, Draco and most of the other Slytherins were continually pummeling the Durmstrang lot in revenge, the entire atmosphere a brutal brawl of students as girls ran for the castle everywhere, screaming for the teachers to come out.

Hermione sighed and turned to look back at Harry, trying hard to prevent her tears from falling as she gently caressed one bloody cheek. She was just about to say something to the girl beside her when she heard another vengeful scream behind them, causing her to stiffen and turn around just in time to see Parvati pointing Harry's wand right at her face.

"You've hurt me for the last time, Hermione..." She hissed slowly, a low eerie laughter erupting from her lips at the look of fear on Hermione's face. She was just about to whisper a spell when surprisingly; another person behind Hermione had beaten her to it.

*"Stupefy!"*

Parvati was out in an instant, collapsing to the ground in an unconscious state while Hermione whirled around, her eyes almost popping out of her sockets when she saw AJ smirking right back at her.

"What? Don't tell me you've never hated the bitch too..." She drawled easily, giving Hermione a weak, teary smile before she reached over and took her brother's wand from Parvati's clenched fist, pocketing it in her robes.

AJ looked up in relief to see Prof. Snape rushing towards the scene in horrified panic, using his wand to petrify every student he passed by as he began yelling out in outrage, his jet eyes blazing in anger.

"All of you stop this at once! A hundred points from Slytherin and I shall be talking to both headmaster Dumbledore and Prof. Karkaroff about this! Fighting in the school grounds, this is an outrage! You could all be expelled for this!" He shouted angrily at them, breaking the war apart.

Seeing Harry's battered body, he immediately rushed over to them and used a simple spell to conjure up a stretcher in which he magically lifted the younger Slytherin's body, his face pale and fearful of the boy's condition.

Pretty soon, Prof. McGonagall and Dumbledore had rushed out as well, both looking incredibly angry than Hermione had ever seen them as they saw Harry's broken and bloody condition.

"Minerva! Take Harry up to Madam Pomfrey at once!" Dumbledore had ordered instantly, his blue eyes filled with worry as Prof. McGonagall paled but nodded.

Both AJ and Hermione watched, faces worried and teary as Prof. McGonagall then magically carried Harry back to the castle, leaving Prof. Snape staring angrily at all the petrified boys in front of him, his gaze lingering accusingly on the Slytherins.

"All of you had better explain yourself immediately." Prof. Dumbledore said calmly as he removed their petrified state with a single wave of his wand, looking at the boys with a rare anger in his normally warm eyes.

Draco finally moved and stepped forward, his face grim and angry. "It wasn't our fault, Professor! We only meant to help Harry, these

Durmstrang bastards ambushed him like the cowards they are!" He blurted out, sneering coldly at the Durmstrang students.

"Language, Mr. Malfoy... Would anyone from Durmstrang care to explain then?" Prof. Dumbledore answered again, patiently watching as Krum nodded in response, clutching his bruised jaw as he opened his mouth to speak.

"What's all this? What's all this?" Prof. Karkaroff demanded as he walked out towards them, his eyes flashing demandingly at Dumbledore in question while his students all instantly began firing their reasons at him to answer.

"*Please*, everyone...Would you all calm yourselves and answer one at a time... Mr. Malfoy? Would you care to explain what happened to Mr. Potter?" Prof. Snape finally spoke up, waving the other students rudely off before turning to look at his favored student.

Draco opened his mouth to speak but once again, he was overcome by another wave of varied responses from the other Slytherins around him, causing Snape to squelch back his irritation and pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Perhaps, we could settle this better in my office with only one of you from each side... Severus, Igor...Seeing is that you two are responsible for these two sides, I'll give you the option of choosing who to explain." Prof. Dumbledore said, sighing heavily.

AJ watched silently as both Draco and Krum stepped forward to stand beside their mentor before Dumbledore nodded and led them back into the castle, the other group of students following after them in a cold silence.

Sighing, AJ closed her eyes and silently followed after Hermione as the Gryffindor silently trailed back into the castle as well, an absent look on the other girl's face as she stared off into space with her eyes a dull, lifeless color.

*Please tell me this is just some bad dream...I've only come out of the hospital wing for less than two days and here I am going back in...*



She thought to herself before she trotted back into the castle, heading for the said location.

Both AJ and Hermione looked up to see a weary Draco entering the room, his cheek bruised and sporting a black eye but otherwise, a look of relief found his face.

He glanced around the room, noticing Harry's motionless body now laid on the same hospital bed AJ had been in, his bruises now bandaged, leaving white strips all over body while a thick white bandage was wrapped around his head, stained slightly with blood.

He noticed that Harry's robes had been changed into a pair of his silk green pajamas and that his glasses and a couple bottles of different colored potions lay on the bedside table beside him along with his wand, which Draco was relieved to see, had been returned to him at last.

Hermione was holding his hand tightly in hers from where she sat on the chair beside his bed while AJ sat on his other side, watching Hermione with a speculative look in her green eyes.

"How is he?"

Hermione instantly shifted uncomfortably, unsure of how to act as AJ instantly stood up and walked over to him, her arms going around him and as she buried her head against him, nuzzling his neck.

"Madam Pomfrey said he's going to be fine... I...Draco, are you—" Her voice broke off as she gently touched the bruise on his cheek, causing Draco to wince in pain but give her a lopsided smile to reassure her. "This? It's nothing, I'll be fine." He assured her, his arms going around her waist.

AJ nodded, burying her face into his as she struggled to hold her tears again, feeling her entire body go limp with relief as she felt Draco's strong arms hold her firmly in comfort.

Hermione watched with mild fascination as AJ seemed to tremble against him, the other girl pressing her face onto Draco's torn robes. "I...Harry, I... He was... Draco, I was scared, I—" She broke off again,

a sob managing to escape from her as Draco only squeezed her in response, dropping a feather-light kiss on her forehead.

"I know...I was there you idiot." He teased weakly, stroking her hair gently as he looked over her shoulder and looked at Hermione with a strange look in his eyes, noticing the way her eyes seemed to focus only on Harry before he looked back at the shivering girl in his arms.

AJ managed a weak laugh in response, mustering up enough strength to punch him lightly on the arm. "Wh...What did Prof. Dumbledore say about the fight?" She asked silently, hiccupping as she struggled to wipe her eyes and regain her composure, embarrassed to have been crying in front of Hermione.

Draco sighed as he sat down on the foot of Harry's bed, burying his face in his hands. "Fortunately, the old man's got a good head on his shoulders after all. He said that it had been mostly Durmstrang's fault about what happened but so their lot will be getting most of the punishment but it turns out it hadn't really been their idea." He explained.

Hermione listened closely, keeping her gaze on Harry but taking in every word the other Slytherins said.

"It turns out Parvati Patil had encouraged the whole ambush so she'll get the worst punishment of all. Three weeks suspension from classes then after that three weeks detention with Snape... Dumbledore will be owling her parents about what happened. A hundred points will be taken from Gryffindor and she'll be getting extra workload from all her teachers—all of which she has to ace or else, she'll be failing all her subjects this year." Draco said, sneering at the thought.

AJ couldn't help but laugh in satisfaction as well, secretly wishing to herself that her punishment was way to merciful based on what she had done. If it had been her, she would have given Parvati Patil a piece of her mind after what she had done.

"When I get my hands on her...That slut..." She mumbled under her breath, causing Hermione to look up and give her a weak, lopsided smile.

"You'll have to beat me to her because I'm going to kill her first..." She kidded weakly, causing both AJ and Draco's eyes to widen in surprise before they both turned back to Harry in awkward silence.

"As for Krum and his group, Prof. Karkaroff managed to talk Dumbledore into not disqualifying him from the tournament since he's pretty much their only shot at winning anyway... He and the other Durmstrang students will be serving three weeks detention as well and Prof. Dumbledore will be informing all their parents about what happened. Their teachers will be informed of their behavior." Draco continued, looking amused at the thought.

"What about you guys?" AJ asked softly, watching as Draco gave a bitter smile and shrugged, looking away.

"Pretty much about the same... They decided we were only defending our house though, since Dumbledore knows how protective we are of fellow Slytherins so they gave us about two weeks of detention. A hundred points will be taken from Slytherin along with a little extra homework... Doesn't really bother me." Draco said arrogantly, shrugging again.

AJ managed a weak laugh, shaking her head while Draco looked at her intently, a passionate look on his handsome features.

AJ blinked and looked at him with a confused expression, fusing her eyebrows together. "What?" She asked but Draco didn't answer as he leaned forward and brushed his lips very gently against hers in a tender kiss.

Hermione instantly looked away, embarrassed as Draco pulled back with a smile on his face. The kiss itself had barely lasted a second and his lips had barely grazed hers but AJ was blushing furiously at the action, her breathing going unsteady.

"You're blushing you know...Stupid skinny brat..." He teased, causing her face to instantly transform into a scowl of annoyance. "That's really none of your business, Malfoy..." She snapped, looking away.

With a small smirk on his face, Draco finally stood up, heading for the door. "Anyway, I'm just going to go take a quick change, my robes are all torn...I'll be back in a few minutes." He said, giving his best friend one last look of concern.

AJ snorted, giving him a derisive look. "You don't have to tell me, it's not like I care where you go." She retorted, causing Draco to chuckle in amusement to himself.

Despite her snotty response, he leaned down to give AJ one last lingering kiss on the cheek before he turned and stalked out of the room, leaving the girls alone in an uneasy silence.

Hermione didn't look up from Harry's face, barely noticing the room around her as she watched the Slytherin's handsome yet bandaged features in admiration, her fingers lightly stroking his cheek.

She didn't notice AJ's eyes on her as she bent down and pressed her lips on Harry's forehead before whispering something in his ear. "I love you..."

AJ opened her mouth to finally say something to her longtime rival when the door burst open, revealing Madam Pomfrey, who bustled into the room immediately, carrying another tray of assorted potions and bandages in her hands.

"Honestly! Fighting on the grounds, the things boys get into these days!" She huffed as she set the tray down onto the other bedside table and yanked the blankets covering Harry, inspecting his form.

"What happened to Mr. Potter here anyways? As far I remember, he's always been able to win against these fights..." Madam Pomfrey asked, looking at Hermione and AJ in question.

"He...There were so many of them... He..." Hermione struggled to find the right words to say, looking at AJ as the Slytherin instantly stood up, diverting Madam Pomfrey's attention to her instead.

"Where are the others? There were so many others involved in the fight, Madam Pomfrey, you might want to check them out as well." AJ

interrupted suddenly, changing the topic as Hermione inwardly felt a rush of relief when Madam Pomfrey tutted in response.

"Oh Ms. Potter, I haven't got time to go looking for a bunch of bruised rebels. If they need medication, let them come to me." She answered, looking slightly irked as she began applying a clear liquid onto the rest of Harry's bruises before wrapping them gently with a white bandage.

"There, that ought to do it...Ms. Potter, do call me the minute your brother wakes up, would you? I need to magically heal up his bruises the moment he gains consciousness...I'm only disinfecting them now, he needs to be awake when I cast the healing spell." The nurse told them.

AJ nodded in response before Madam Pomfrey finally left the room, mumbling to herself with words that sounded suspiciously like "These Slytherins...Always looking for a fight..."

As soon as she heard the door click shut again, she sighed and buried her face in her hands, not noticing the small smile that Hermione gave her.

"Thanks..."

AJ looked up immediately, her eyes narrowing at Hermione's tone of voice. "For what, Granger?" she asked sharply, trying to sneer but finding out she hadn't the strength to at that very moment.

Hermione shrugged and looked back at Harry again, clasping his hand firmly in hers before she answered. "For saving my face... *Twice*...I didn't know what I was going to say to Madam Pomfrey...*and* I don't know what would've happened if you hadn't saved me from Parvati a while ago..." She admitted, earning a weak but surprised smile from the other girl.

"...You're...You're welcome then, Granger...Think nothing of it...I guess..." She replied, sounding incredulous as Hermione looked back up and flashed her another smile, marveling at the remarkable resemblance AJ really did have to Harry.

She couldn't figure out why she hadn't noticed it too much before...Perhaps it had been because she had never really gotten the chance to be this close to AJ that she never got the opportunity to inspect her features face to face...

No doubt about it...The same eyes, the same lopsided grin...The same pale complexion and glossy back hair... Even the curve of their jaws was the same though AJ's was definitely more slender and feminine than Harry's strong one...

Though, looking at the other girl's eyes, there was something astonishing in them that she had failed to notice before in the past... She knew for a fact that Harry was the older twin, she had read enough about them to know some personal information...But now, as she looked at the surprising maturity and wisdom in AJ's eyes, she couldn't help but compare them to Harry's...

Though Harry was the protective and domineering twin, his eyes held a more child-like emotion in them whenever his guard had been let down... They seemed so much younger and less experienced than AJ's own mature, level-headed gaze...

It seemed to Hermione, judging from the look in their eyes, that Harry was the younger child and AJ was the responsible older sister... Ironical how these things turn about... And because of it, she couldn't help but feel a surge of respect and admiration for her once enemy.../ *had her all wrong after all...Just like I had 'Harry' all wrong...* She thought in amazement.

The girl was beautiful; she'll give her that but her eyes held something she rarely saw in the other girls around them. They held knowledge, understanding...maturity and something else...Something that surprised her as she had *never* seen it in AJ's eyes before until now...*bravery...*

*She would have made a great Gryffindor...* She thought in mild amusement, shaking her head and almost laughing at the absurd idea as she finally looked away and sighed, closing her eyes.

"I...I'm glad you're awake now...And I'm glad you're feeling better." Hermione said awkwardly, unsure of what she could have said to

earn AJ's trust as AJ merely gave one nod in response, her eyes showing no signs of her reaction.

"Thank you."

Hermione bit her lip and racked her brain for another thing to say, hating the sudden gaps of silence that were making her feel extremely uncomfortable.

"We've...We've been enemies for how many years now?" She asked again, nearly cursing out loud at herself at how stupid her question must have sounded like to the other girl but it seemed if AJ did think the question was stupid, she didn't give any sign of it.

"...Three years now...Ever since first year." AJ answered absently, her hand moving to clasp around Harry's free one as Hermione could only nod in response, her brain empty of what she could say next.

Silence reigned around them for a long moment, causing a strange sense of peace and calmness to fall upon the two girls before AJ finally stood up and walked over to stand beside Hermione, an unreadable look in her eyes.

Hermione didn't look up from where she had her head buried in her hands, her eyes shut in exhaustion as she tried to think about the events that had happened.

She didn't see the resigned look on AJ's face before the Slytherin finally spoke up, startling right through Hermione's deep thoughts.

"You...and...my brother...?"

Surprised, Hermione looked up to see AJ's curious gaze, her eyes boring right into Hermione's almost as if she was looking for the sincerity in her eyes as she answered.

"Yes..." Hermione replied softly, watching AJ's face intently as AJ only nodded, keeping her facial expression frustratingly blank and neutral of any emotions.

Slowly, the girl turned around so Hermione couldn't see the pained look in her eyes, feeling the familiar feeling of sadness fill up inside her again as she forced herself to continue with the most painful thing she had to...*let him go...*

"H-how...How long has this been happening?" AJ asked again, her back still turned to the Gryffindor so Hermione couldn't see the tears forming in her eyes.

"E-ever since the year started...You heard about it...It had all rooted from...from that bet." Hermione replied, feeling her heart clench painfully as she thought of the bet yet again but she forced herself to squelch it down.

Again, AJ nodded silently, remaining silent for a long, tense moment before she finally spoke up again, her voice carefully slow and measured.

"He... He hurt you a lot of times then...?" She asked lightly, a gentleness in her voice that made Hermione blink in surprise at her, stunned before she found her voice to answer.

"All the bloody time..." She whispered, her voice barely audible but AJ heard it, once again surprising Hermione as she let out a soft, amused chuckle of affectionate laughter.

"That's Harry alright...Can't seem to stop hurting the ones he love..." She commented fondly, carefully raising a hand and wiping at the corner of her eyes before Hermione could notice.

Hermione finally eased herself and allowed a light chuckle of agreement as well, her eyes shining in affection as she turned to look at her sleeping Slytherin. "Yes...And the funny thing is...He just loves to choose the harder path...He tends to hurt himself as much as he hurts those around him..." She added softly.

AJ laughed out loud now this time, the tears now continuously falling down her cheeks as she nods in amusement again. "I know...The stupid git...I don't understand why other girls fall all over themselves for such a jerk like him..." She kidded gently, shaking her head.



Hermione smiled now, feeling a warm fluttering of peace rise up inside her as she heard the gentleness of AJ's voice. "I know...Me neither..." She agreed, the smile never leaving her face.

AJ seemed to be struggling with the right words as she hastily wiped at the tears falling from her eyes, unsure of what she was going to say. "He's just... No matter what he does to mask himself as a tough Slytherin...What you have to understand about him is that he's only a lost—"

"Little boy seeking for attention..." Hermione spoke along with her, causing AJ to look at her with wide emerald green eyes before both girls burst into gentle laughter at their own similarities.

The two didn't notice as Draco once again entered the room, watching them silently in surprise from where he had stopped abruptly by the entrance door when he had seen the unbelievable sight.

Hermione blinked, watching as AJ turned around to face her, finally allowing Hermione to see the tears falling from her eyes and rolling down her cheeks. "Do you love him?" She asked, her voice now a dead silent whisper.

The Gryffindor didn't hesitate in answering, nodding firmly before she answered. "With all my heart..." She replied softly with such sincerity in her eyes that AJ had give her a tearful smile again.

Draco watched this all in silence as Hermione finally stood up and stood right in front of her once Slytherin rival, biting her lip in uncertainty as waited for AJ's reaction.

To both Hermione and Draco's surprise, AJ had broken out into a tearful laugh again, sheepishly dabbing at her leaking eyes before she gave Hermione a small but warm grin. "Well then I don't see what the problem is around here anymore." She managed to say.

By now, Hermione's eyes were bulging out of their sockets, her jaw hanging open in disbelief as she barely managed to find her voice to speak. "B-but—"

She stopped again when AJ held out her hand to her, her green eyes understanding as she gave Hermione a genuine smile. "Truce?"

Hermione instantly felt her eyes stinging as she easily returned the smile, feeling her heart soaring in her chest as a feeling of happiness and peace overwhelmed her. She stared for a long moment at the hand stretched out in front of her before AJ finally spoke up, her voice sounding indignant.

"Well? I don't bite, Granger...I'll leave that up to my brother..." She teased, surprising Hermione as she gave her a wink, causing the Gryffindor to give her a scandalized look.

Then, allowing herself to laugh at AJ's sudden smirk, she reached forward and clasped AJ's hand tightly in her own, giving the delicate limb a firm shake.

"Truce..." She replied, nodding as AJ smiled again, a new sense of respect and acceptance shining in the beautiful Slytherin's eyes.

"Take care of him..." AJ said softly, letting go of her hand and patting Hermione awkwardly on the shoulder.

"AJ, thank you, I—"

"You silly git, go to him." AJ urged, interrupting her as she pushed Hermione lightly towards Harry again, holding back a wave of sobs threatening to escape her but she was surprised, however, when Hermione had spun around and had instead, enveloped the Slytherin into her arms in a tight, sisterly hug.

AJ froze in surprise, not knowing how to react to her former enemy hugging her but slowly, she finally lifted one corner of her lips in a smile as she let her arms slowly return the gentle embrace.

"Thank you for understanding...And for accepting us, *AJ*..." She whispered, crying against the other girl now as AJ could only squeeze her back in response, crying as well.

"W-welcome to th-the f-family t-then...*Hermione*..." She answered, giving Hermione another firm squeeze before she pulled away, wiping hastily at her eyes.

Hermione looked up to see a now neatly dressed Draco finally walking towards them, a slightly hesitant look on his face as he stopped to stand right beside AJ, looking indecisively at Hermione.

AJ looked at him in surprise but didn't protest when Draco reached for her hand, squeezing it gently for a second before he finally turned back to Hermione, a solemn look on his face.

"I'll be honest with you Granger...I really wouldn't choose you for my best friend if I had been given another chance but after what I've seen today, you've...you've earned my respect. Not bad...for a Gryffindor...I'll lay off on you two..." Draco spoke carefully, considering his words.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something but Draco instantly moved away, his eyes widening in alarm. "But don't get me wrong here, we're not friends *Granger*...I'll just leave you alone from now on...Your other friends though...that's a different story." He added, smirking.

"Of course not, Malfoy... I wouldn't want *you* as a friend. Who knows what kind of silly dares and bets you'd put me through.- Hermione retorted back evenly with an amused smirk on her own face, causing AJ to laugh at Draco's annoyed look.

"Good then. For a minute there I thought you were gonna hug me the way you did AJ here." He said smugly, wrapping an arm around AJ's waist, causing the girl to elbow him in irritation.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, eyeing him incredulously. "Merlin forbid no, who knows what kind of germs you're carrying Malfoy? I might get infected with the 'snotty brat virus'...AJ, how do you stand him?" She remarked again, earning a gentle grin from AJ.

"I don't know either...He's an ugly, snotty, annoying little egotistical brat but you know I love him..." AJ answered, causing Draco to

instantly snap his attention to her with wide, ecstatic silver eyes at having heard the words from AJ he had waited for so long.

Hermione felt herself smiling back as she nodded, watching as AJ colored in realization and refused to meet Draco's questioning gaze, turning back to Hermione as she nodded farewell.

"Well, I'll leave you two alone for a while...I'll be right back. Watch over him, will you Hermione?" AJ said hastily before walking over to Harry to give him a light kiss on the forehead.

"I will..." Hermione responded, watching as AJ headed outside the room, passing right by Draco, who was still looking at her with an odd smile on his face.

*Thank you...* She thought as she watched Draco scramble hurriedly after AJ, leaving Hermione alone in the room as she shook her head at them.

"AJ!"

AJ felt her heart pounding nervously as she pretended to ignore Draco's call, urging her feet to walk faster as she heard the blonde Slytherin's heavy footsteps trailing after her.

"Potter, you coward! Don't you run away from me, dammit!" Draco snapped at her in anger, causing AJ to sigh as she finally stopped and faced him, wringing her hands nervously in front of her.

Draco stopped right in front of her, his faces barely inches from her own as AJ felt her breathing start to speed up as she caught sight of the look in Draco's eyes. "Tell me, Potter...Did you mean what you said back there?" He asked slowly, knowing full well the answer to his own question.

*I need to hear it from her own lips...* He thought, watching as AJ managed a look of confusion, raising her eyebrow at him. "What do you mean, Draco?" She asked softly, looking unsure of herself when she answered.

Draco looked at her, his eyes narrowing pointedly. "I mean...Did you mean what you said back there? When you said...When you said you loved me...?" He asked again, this time looking directly into her eyes when he spoke.

AJ felt her cheeks burning she looked away sharply, feeling butterflies fluttering around in her stomach just as she forced a laugh. "I—I...What does it matter, Draco...I... You're such an annoying idiot! I—"

"The answer is only a simple yes or a no, AJ..." Draco pointed out, stepping forward towards her just as AJ backed away at the same time, smirking at the nervous look on her face.

"Draco, I...I... What I feel for you is—"

"I don't give a bloody damn how you feel for me, what I want to know is if you love me or not. Answer the question, AJ." Draco drawled, interrupting her as he stepped forward again, managing to back AJ right in front of a closet's opening.

"Draco, you jerk, would you stop this?! Someone could see us; we're in the middle of a corridor!" AJ had suddenly hissed, her eyes widening in panic as she glanced nervously behind the broom closet behind her, feeling her heart beat quicken in fear.

"Why is it so damn hard for you to say those three words to my face, AJ? Why is it so hard for you to admit your feelings?" Draco suddenly asked, his eyes flashing in annoyance as he glared at her with a dark, hungry look in his eyes, stepping closer and closer to the other Slytherin until he had finally backed her into the closet.

AJ swallowed nervously and bit her lip as she felt her back finally make contact with the closet's wall, Draco stepping closer again until she found that she was staring up at those piercing silver orbs, silently cursing his height advantage over her.

"Well? We're not in the corridors now..." Draco had smirked, raising a hand up to slowly flick on the nearest light switch, a faint glow of yellow suddenly enhancing the room.

"Because...I...Dammit Draco, this isn't funny anymore, you're really starting to make me nervous." AJ said again, trying in vain to distract his attention to something else.

"Damn *you*, Potter, can't you just say it?! It's so fucking obvious; I can see it in your eyes! Say it, dammit! I've waited too damn long already!" Draco growled darkly, his eyes flashing as he placed his hands on both sides of the wall opposite AJ's head, successfully trapping the other Slytherin between the wall and himself.

AJ stiffened in nervousness, blushing dark red as Draco glared right at her, his eyes smoldering in unhidden desire as he stared right back into her eyes in fierce demand.

"Draco, if anyone sees us in here..." She let her voice trail off as she raised a hand but Draco easily caught it and pinned that hand back against the wall again, making AJ wince in surprise.

A slow, sexy smile spreading out onto his face, he easily eased his other hand to clutch her free one, pinning it right onto the wall as well just as he leaned over and kissed a trail along the exposed, slender curve of her neck.

"Draco..." AJ didn't finish, closing her eyes as Draco continued to trail his lips gently against her neck, traveling up until he kissed her near her lips, pulling back to see the look of desire on her face that matched his own.

Leaning forward again, he brushed his lips against her earlobe, lingering for a long moment before he spoke in a soft whisper against her. "You want me, Potter...You know you do...Just say the words and you're mine..." He teased, his lips barely touching her as he did.

AJ held back her own growing desire for him as she forced her eyes open, allowing Draco to see the longing look in her green eyes. "I love you...Draco..."

That was all it took for Draco to finally close the distance between them and pressed his lips firmly onto hers in a deep, passionate kiss, all his hidden lust and desire for her bursting through his veins as he sought to savor her sweet lips.

AJ felt her head spinning as Draco immediately took the initiative, pressing her roughly against the wall to deepen the kiss just as the hands he used to pin her own loosened around hers, allowing AJ's hands to wrap tightly around his neck and his own to wrap around her waist.

Draco could barely contain himself any longer as he kissed her with a fierce and hungry passion, feeling every ripple of want for her he had been holding back for so long break out and possess his entire body.

He felt dangerously out of control as he deepened the kiss again, his lips demanding hungrily and savagely what it needed from her just as AJ began to melt in his arms, her body going limp as Draco had to hold her to keep her from falling.

A part of his mind had screamed at him the need for oxygen, causing him to pull away from her for brief moment before he had claimed her lips once more, this time in a fiercer, more powerful kiss that caused AJ's knees to buckle from underneath her.

AJ entangled her hands in his hair, her fingers playing with the silky strands as Draco finally slowed the kiss down into a gentler caress, one hand going up to stroke AJ's cheek lovingly.

Both Slytherins were hardly aware of the scandalized glances they were receiving from some of the red-faced students passing by the closet in the corridors as they allowed themselves to lead on to a full make-out session, their lips still unwilling to separate from the others.

Draco murmured something appreciatively into their intertwined lips before he pressed her harder onto the cold wall, his hands wrapping around her and encouraging her to wrap her legs around his waist, which AJ obliged, clinging onto his neck as she did for support.

A strong surge of lust had suddenly burst within him as he, without breaking the kiss, released one hand to reach out behind him and shut the door of the closet, successfully leaving him and AJ alone in the small, lighted area.

He felt AJ tense instantly at the action just before he let his hands begin to roam and explore along the slender curves of her body,

causing the girl to gasp in surprise and pull away from the kiss, breathing hard as she pressed her forehead onto his.

"No, Draco...Not here, not now...Not yet..." She said breathlessly, frantically pushing against Draco's chest in horror as she began fidgeting in his arms as Draco kept a firm hold on her, still supporting her weight as he prevented her from pulling away.

Draco looked at the wildly nervous look on AJ's face as she sought to catch her breath, her breathing erratic while she looked at Draco as though she was unsure of how she was going to speak.

"...I'm sorry..." AJ admitted in a timid whisper, her eyes dropping down onto the floor in obvious fear, avoiding Draco's gaze but Draco gently tilted her chin back up to look at him, leaning forward to give her a kiss on the forehead.

"It's okay..." He whispered back softly, managing a weak smile as he slowly loosened his tight grip on her form, finally allowing AJ to set her feet back firmly on the floor.

Draco didn't release his arms around her as he pulled AJ into a warm, tender embrace, allowing the girl to relax against him, her face burying against his chest while she shut her eyes, trying to calm herself. He gently stroked her hair, leaning over to kiss her affectionately on the ear before burying his face into her shoulder, closing his own eyes.

"I guess I'm still a little scared...I'm sorry..." She whispered, her arms tightening around him as Draco allowed an amused chuckle, causing the girl to blush red in embarrassment.

"I know...I wasn't planning on seducing you in such a filthy place like the broom closet, Potter. I just wanted to touch you..." He replied, his voice soft but teasing as AJ managed a weak laugh nodding before snuggling herself into his arms.

"I can wait." He promised, feeling AJ nod slowly against him before she sighed and gave him a kiss on the cheek.



"I know...Draco come on, I want to check up on Harry again..." AJ said, trying to ease herself out of Draco's arms but Draco held on with a grin on his face, one hand moving to brush a lock of hair out of her eyes.

"AJ...Will you...Will you go out with me this coming Hogsmeade weekend??" He suddenly asked, letting his thumb trail over her cheek, tracing over her soft lips as he spoke.

Draco found that AJ didn't need to answer as he was soon enthralled by her sweet lips once again, feeling the whole world fade around them once more as he pulled her closer, both Slytherins unaware of the light bulb gone dead just above their heads...

Hermione yawned to herself, sighing as she let her eyes slowly travel over to the watch on her wrist. *11:00 PM...Merlin, no wonder I'm so tired...* She thought drearily, yawning again as she plopped herself down onto the chair beside Harry's hospital bed, her eyes traveling back to Harry's sleeping form.

She allowed a small, fond smile to spread out on her face before reaching over and pushing back the single lock of dark hair that had fallen into the Slytherin's eyes. Her eyes riveted almost immediately onto the exposed scar on his forehead, the mark he had been so famous for at the time of his birth...

Sighing, she gently placed a soft kiss onto the offending mark before pulling away, resting her arms onto the bed and burying her face in them, closing her eyes sleepily.

She hadn't known how to react earlier that day... Somehow, it seemed that she had an uneasy feeling about everything happening lately... So far, to her immense surprise, the turn of events happening had been surprisingly peaceful but she wasn't fooled.

She knew it was only the calm right before the real storm began...And somehow, she had a strange intuition that the real storm coming was much more than just petty lover's quarrels or break-ups...She had a feeling it was something dangerous...

Frowning slightly, she recalled earlier that morning what she had tried to research about in the library after her talk with Prof. McGonagall...The serpent-shaped birthmark on Harry's shoulder she had seen the other night she had been with him... She knew she had definitely seen it somewhere before, and her suspicions had been right.

She had seen it when she had been leafing and rifling through some ancient library books containing historical information about the four founders of Hogwarts...

The serpent birthmark she had seen on Harry's shoulder was the legendary family symbol of the line of Salazar Slytherin, magically burned onto every member of their clan for generations until it had finally become a part of their family, becoming a permanent birthmark to powerful wizards with his blood...A Family Insignia of Pure-blooded Wizarding Families through Generations...

From what she had recalled from other studies, rumors say that Lord Voldemort himself had a birthmark just like it when he was about Harry's age but she heard nothing of the rumors to confirm it as true.

*If what those books say is true and that mark is really the family insignia of Salazar's Slytherin's bloodline, then...why does Harry have it?* Hermione asked silently, looking over to Harry in thought.

In the past, she recalled reading a number of compilations of family symbols used by the old, wizarding families of today but she hadn't really been paying attention at that time...She regretted that now. She had a feeling she was definitely onto something here...

*If only I could somehow sneak into the Restricted Section when I have more time...* She thought, briefly remembering the book title she had seen in their library's card catalog that day.

*What was that...? Forbidden Prophecies, the Blood of the Serpents...* She thought, shuddering at the title as it actually came out as a whisper from her lips.

Her eyes narrowed again, she reached a hand out to Harry's shoulder, the limb reluctantly hovering right above him as she had an inner debate with herself to check the mark or not.

*I wonder...* She thought as she quietly took her wand out with her other hand and muttered a spell under her breath, immediately causing a spark of fire to erupt from the tip, illuminating the dim room.

There was *one* valuable thing she had learned... The books had said, supposedly that to check whether the mark was truly the sign of Salazar Slytherin, one had to check it by letting it be illuminated by the glow of a fire's light. If the serpent appeared to hiss and move in the fire light as if it were alive, then that mark was indeed truly Salazar's...

Biting her lip now, she urged a shaking hand to try and reach out for one sleeve of Harry's shirt but before she could do anything, his hand had finally shot out, claspings tightly around hers in dangerous warning.

She let out a startled gasp as Harry's eyes had shot open instantly, glaring in front of him in angry suspicion. Seeing Hermione there though, those green orbs instantly softened and he let out a weak smile, his grip on her hand easing into a gentle caress.

"Hey..." He murmured sleepily, wincing in pain as he tried to sit up on the bed, causing Hermione to shake her head firmly and push him back down.

"Don't you get up yet, Potter... Your injuries are still sore." She huffed, earning a hidden fond grin from the Slytherin as she hastily wrapped the covers around him again, making sure he was comfortable before sitting back down.

Harry nodded in reassurance before he silently reached a hand out for the glass of water beside his bed, taking a long sip before lying back down onto the pillows.

He returned Hermione's accusing glare with a teasing sneer. "What are you worried about, Granger? I've felt much worse than getting beaten up you know." He pointed out, rolling his eyes.

Hermione didn't answer for a long moment, merely looking at him before she suddenly launched herself at him, burying her face into his chest.

"You stupid reckless git! They could have killed you! Why didn't you fight back...Why did you have to keep taunting them by getting back up...? Is your pride really that hard for you to set aside for your own life...?" She whispered softly, willing away the tears in her eyes.

Harry let out a gentle smile as he stroked her hair, his gaze focused intently onto her form. "You Gryffidorks are idiots aren't you...Think about it, Granger...If I had fought back, they...They would have hurt you too....And I can't have that...." He answered back firmly.

Hermione was glad that she had her face hidden from Harry at that time so as he couldn't see the blush rising into her cheeks. "But why did you keep taunting them, Harry? You knew they could have crushed you..." She said.

Harry let out a bitter chuckle, his eyes suddenly hardening in hatred and in challenge. "Because...I'm not afraid of them... I won't give in, I will not be weak...At least now, till the time I lost consciousness...I have something I can be proud of..." He whispered, his voice sounding distant.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in his arms, unsure of what she was going to say before she pulled back and gave him a small smile, dabbing at her eyes hastily before he could see them. "You know what? Prof. Moody came in here just thirty minutes ago...He asked me how you were doing." She told him, hoping to divert his attention to something else.

She was surprised to see Harry's eyes instantly narrow in suspicion, his smile melting away into a fierce frown. "What did the old man want?" He growled, a menacing tone in his voice.

Hermione blinked in confusion. "Nothing...He seemed really weird at first, like he was going to look at something behind your shoulder but then he stopped and left in silence." She explained, now looking closely at him for any sign of clue about the serpent birthmark.

"Do you want to tell me something about it?"

Harry's eyes flashed as he glared darkly at her, allowing her to see for a brief moment the cold and malice she saw there at the beginning of the year. "Leave it then, Hermione. It's none of your business." He snapped, turning away.

Hermione winced but stayed silent, watching as the Slytherin tried to calm his seething temper, one hand going to fiercely clamp onto the back of his shoulder before he pulled it away, turning back to face her.

"I—Sorry about that...I just...I was just pissed off I guess...I never liked that man anyway. And besides, I don't want to talk about that..." He replied, his voice easing into a calmer tone.

She nodded in response, by now very much used to Harry's sudden outbursts when he was mad about something. Perhaps it was just something she would have to live with if she was going to be with him...

"Where's my sister?" Harry asked suddenly, his green eyes darting around the room before dropping in disappointment, trying to hide the hurt look in his eyes.

"No, no! AJ was here with me earlier, the reason she left was because Prof. McGonagall only allowed one student to stay with you since it *is* a school night... Well...AJ...She let me be the one to stay with you..." Hermione said, giving Harry a beautiful smile.

Harry smiled back, his spirits suddenly feeling lighter than he had in days as he imagined AJ and Hermione finally settling the things between them.

"We...We've talked... Harry, and... Well, because of the events that had happened lately, we've..." Hermione let her voice trail off as she saw Harry's curious gaze.

"Yes?"

"We've...let's just say, me and the princess of Slytherin have finally come to an understanding." She finished just as Harry let out a

relieved and ecstatic laugh, reaching over and pulling Hermione into a soft kiss.

"She's still an annoying little brat though..." Hermione kidded but Harry shook his head and smirked in agreement, looking incredibly amused at the news.

"What else is new? How about Draco, where is he?" He asked but Hermione rolled her eyes in response before answering.

"He was here too but as soon as AJ left, he followed. I don't know how you can stand him, he's such an arrogant little jerk..." Hermione said but Harry laughed, giving her a wink. "Birds of the same feather flock together I guess..." He answered, smirking.

Hermione only smirked back in agreement before finally standing up and plopping herself right beside him on his bed, leaning back into his arms as Harry enveloped her in a hug, her back pressing against his chest.

"Hermione?"

She squeezed his hand in response. "I...I'm sorry about everything. About the bet, about the times I hurt you...I...I just—"

"Shh...I know, Harry. You don't have to say anything anymore...I just want to forget about everything that happened in our past and concentrate on what's ahead...On learning from the mistakes." She told him, kissing him gently on the cheek.

Harry nodded, keeping silent as he rested his chin on her shoulder, closing his eyes sleepily just as Hermione spoke again, her voice dropping to a low whisper.

"Harry?"

He looked up and met her gaze, allowing Hermione to see those sought-after green orbs... The eyes that had tormented her through these years...The eyes that had hid away a ton of painful lies as it had enthralled her with emotions...that had burned right through her

the first time she had kissed...that had been there to witness in their depths the first time they had made love...

*The eyes I had fallen in love with...His eyes on me...My Slytherin prince...* She thought with a smile as she gently caressed his soft, pale cheek, finding herself getting lost in those sparkling emeralds yet again.

"Thank you..."

**A/N:** A little piece of trivia information: that scene when Harry got beaten up was actually based on a scene from **Meteor Garden I**, a series I seem to have gotten hooked up on lately... Well, if you guys are interested, here are the next and **final big events coming up:** Pensieve, Third Task Training with Hermione, The final Rita Skeeter article, Third Task, Graveyard scene, The final confrontation between Harry and Voldemort. Don't worry, that may seem like a lot but it's only about 3 or 4 more long chapters or so... **THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO REVIEWED AND KEPT ON REVIEWING FOR THE LAST CHAPTER!! mwah! mwah! mwah! I LOVE YOU ALL!** I never would have made this far without your help, guys so thanks... **THANK YOU TO ALL THOSE WHO EMAILED ME! PLEASE REVIEW!! OR EMAIL ME WITH ANY OF YOUR COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS!**

## Chapter 30- Against the Odds

“HERMIONE! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING?! HARRY SODDING POTTER?? HOLY BLOODY MERLIN’S HELL!!”

Hermione sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose patiently as her redheaded best friend standing in front of her continued to shout and berate her of the consequences of her past actions—something of which she had never hesitated to be perfectly aware of.

“Ron, I meant to tell you both but see, things got completely out of hand and before I could, I—”

“I DON’T CARE, HERMIONE! WE’RE YOUR BEST FRIENDS, I THINK WE PRETTY MUCH DESERVE TO KNOW IF YOU’RE DATING OUR WORST ENEMY! HE’S A BLOODY DARK WIZARD FOR MERLIN’S SAKE! ‘AND’ HE’S A SLIMY SLYTHERIN!” Ron interrupted again, his eyes nearly large enough to be bulging out of its sockets.

Hermione couldn’t help it. She let out a light giggle as she observed the ridiculous expression on Ron’s face. Ron stopped ranting immediately and turned to give her an annoyed glare, raising an eyebrow in question.

“And what may I ask is funny?” He snapped irritably just as Seamus burst through the doors of the empty Gryffindor common room, his face a mirror of Ron’s anger and fury.

“Hermione! How could you keep something this big from us? I thought you trusted us!” Seamus exploded immediately, his thick Irish accent now more audible than ever when he used his angry, rushing tone of voice.

“Yeah well I thought that too but it seems you and Ron kept your own secrets from me about *my* rival as well. Well...former rival.” She corrected herself, secretly smiling at her own slip-up.

Seamus immediately froze, a guilty look on his face while Ron colored, his eyes instantly dropping to the floor. “Besides, I didn’t



want to tell you guys because I knew you'd react violently right away before you gave me the chance to think it over." Hermione explained, shaking her head.

Ron looked mildly offended. "We do NOT react violently! The fact is, you still chose to date that complete jerk Potter behind our back and—"

"You're ranting, Ronald. See, this is exactly what I told you...You guys are reacting the way I expected you to react. You start those rants, those shouts, those—"

"I AM NOT SHOUTING!!"

Seamus and Hermione both stopped and looked at Ron's flushed and heavily breathing face, the redhead's eyes strangely unfocused and filled with anger and impatience.

Hermione bit her lip, trying to hide a smile but as soon as the loud snort of pent-up laughter had left Seamus' lips, it all came tumbling out of her and she just threw back her head and laughed right along with him.

Ron's looked frantically at the both of them with wide, crazed eyes as both Hermione and Seamus started laughing hysterically, clutching each other's form for support.

"It's not funny."

He winced as the pair laughed harder, continuing until he found the corner of his own lips lifting up into a crooked smile at their antics. "I swear, I don't know how I put up with you two." He said, rolling his eyes.

He waited until both Hermione and Seamus had calmed down before finally sighing and plopping down onto the couch next to them, looking deep in thought.

There was a tense silence after that, Hermione fiddling nervously with her fingers on her lap before Ron finally gave in and broke the silence, looking at her in question and sincerity. "But seriously

Hermione...Why didn't you tell us...?" Ron finally asked, the hurt and concern now present in his eyes.

Hermione sighed and looked away, slightly guilty at seeing the look in his eyes.

"I...I guess I just wasn't so sure if you guys would understand the situation... I mean, he *is* Harry Potter after all...Though he's done so much to us in the past; I've always had a crush on him either way. I guess I was just afraid that if I told you guys the truth, you'd both manage to convince me to stay away from him and I'd lose the chance to actually see if that crush can develop into something more. Inside, perhaps I really *did* want this to happen in a way..." She said, sighing to herself before turning to look at them.

To her surprise, Ron and Seamus were listening intently to her words, their eyes a mixture of surprise, annoyance and surprisingly understanding. It was Seamus who spoke up first... "Hermione, I think what Ron was trying to say here was that we were just hurt that you never bothered to tell us about this... I mean, we thought you thought of us as best friends." Seamus explained.

Hermione sighed and nodded, looking slightly sheepish. "I did. I mean, I *do*. I was just afraid I suppose...I mean, it's not like you guys were ever open to talking about these kinds of things with me in the past." She admitted.

Ron and Seamus exchanged glances, looking slightly guilty before Ron finally sighed and gave Hermione a small, hesitant smile. "Well then I guess that's where we did wrong. I'm sorry too... It seems I've been keeping a secret my own love life from you guys..." He confessed, refusing to meet Seamus' teasing gaze.

"But Hermione... *Why* Harry Potter? Isn't he one blasted evil wizard? I reckon he's about ready to become the next dark lord if given the proper equipment and power... Are you really willing to involve yourself with him? He'll bring nothing but hardship and danger into your life...Not to mention, he goes through girls faster than Lavender goes through shoes..." Ron pointed out, his eyes looking concerned.

Hermione sighed, not looking at him as she managed to give them a reassuring nod. "I know that, Ron... I've thought about that already... I know how much he's probably involved with dark things we'd never imagine and how dangerous his life is... I know how much getting involved with him could endanger me as well... But..." Her voice trailed off for a minute before she looked up and gave them a smile.

"I also know he's sincere about me... *And* I also know that I love him... I'm willing to see past all those things...I'm willing to be blind for him...to be a *fool* for him... because frankly, that's what love can make people do. Make fools of themselves... I've already been a fool loads of times...I'll tell you that. But hey... Who hasn't?" She said softly, lifting one shoulder into a half-shrug.

Ron and Seamus didn't say anything, Ron just giving her an odd look while Seamus coughed uncomfortably, looking uneasy about what he wanted to say. "Er... But Hermione... Isn't he like the leader of a Slytherins-only cult or something? Won't you be exposed to that dark wizard stuff if you spend a lot of time with him?" He asked, scratching his head.

Ron gave him a scathing look while Hermione's lips twitched into a smile, chuckling softly in response. "*Slytherin cult?* Well that's definitely one I haven't heard before, Seamus..." Hermione said, giggling to herself.

Seamus blushed in embarrassment but grinned sheepishly, offering a disarming look. "Er...Sorry... Guess that *was* a bit ridiculous... I just can't forget about that time in second year when he spoke parseltongue to that snake...And when...when he threatened us with dark magic...It was seriously scary..." He admitted, biting his lip.

Hermione's eyebrows came together in thought, surprised at what the boy said. "He did? Well...I don't know about that... All I can say is...I've gotten to know him now, guys...And I can guarantee you that though Harry is *indeed* a jerk, a bastard and a self-centered, sadistic brat, he isn't *evil*. He may appear to be but inside, he's really not. Just trust me on this one, okay?" She encouraged, squeezing both their hands.

Albeit reluctantly, Seamus nodded while Ron asked one more question, looking Hermione straight into the eye. "You're really sure you've got him entirely figured out about this one, Hermione? All we're really concerned of here is your safety and welfare... In truth, we really don't want you getting involved with such a dark wizard like Potter...It could mean much more serious things than heartbreak you know...Think of the crowd he hangs around with...I don't understand the guy at all..." He spoke softly.

Hermione bit her lip but nodded firmly, her eyes assuring Ron of her answer. "I know that Ron...And I'm sure. Harry hates the dark lord as much as anyone and...well...that would mean we're on the same side...right?" She asked, though she sounded a bit unsure of her own words.

Ron and Seamus managed to nod, the three Gryffindors falling into a tense, heated silence of thoughts for a long moment. Neither one spoke for a full three minutes, all three avoiding each other's eyes until Seamus finally broke the silence, forcing out a light laugh.

"Well...If it helps Hermione...We're *not* mad at you okay? And we're not going to shun you away just because you made the innocent mistake of falling in love with Potter...It's not as if that was your fault right? We're not *that* thick you know." He kidded, giving her a wink.

Hermione visibly relaxed, her features moving to smile warmly at him. "I'm glad...For a minute, I was thinking you guys were going to react the same way the Slytherins reacted with Zabini..." She said, shuddering.

They laughed, shaking their head. "Hell no, we're not as shallow and diluted as those Slytherin pricks... But Hermione, I do have to warn you though, we don't accept Potter okay? We only accept *you*. Nothing will ever change how much we hate the so-called *Slytherin duo*...Our worlds are just too far to ever coincide..." Ron said, giving her an apologetic look.

Hermione laughed, nodding. "I know that already. I wasn't expecting the Slytherins and Gryffindors to sign a bloody '*treaty of peace*' just because their so-called champion is involved with me. No, it's okay. I'm just relieved you guys don't hate me." She told them, smiling.

Before either of the two could say anything, she held up her hands in front of her, giving them an exasperated look. "But enough of my love life, guys! Why don't you tell me about what *I*'ve been missing out with you two as well...?" She asked, her grin turning feral.

Seamus burst out laughing as Ron blushed a deep crimson. "Oh my love life is still currently non-existent but you should ask *Ronnie-boy* here just how exactly *successful* his own is..." The Irish Gryffindor teased, ending it with a cough that sounded suspiciously like '*Lavender*'.

Hermione's own eyes sparkled with curiosity as she pondered on what Ron had just said. "Speaking of which... Just what is it between you and Lavender lately?" She asked, genuinely curious as she gazed at him.

Ron blushed darker and looked away, looking slightly abashed. "I—I...I don't really know myself, actually... I mean... It had started with the Yule Ball...She...I... We walked along the gardens and...Well...She just sort of came out...It was all a blur from there." He said, sighing heavily.

Seamus looked confused. "But...I just saw Lavender earlier...She was crying and she said you two broke up over something... Don't you love her, mate?" He asked him slowly.

Ron buried his face in his hands, looking completely unsure of himself. "I...I don't know, Seamus. I...I *thought* I loved her but...See... Today...When I saw AJ Potter walk into that hall I...I don't know, I was suddenly all confused again. I mean, I *thought* I had made the right choice but after seeing her... it just seems as though...As though I'm not so sure anymore." He finished, looking up at them.

Hermione's eyes widened to the size of saucers. "So why did you break up with Lavender then?" She asked gently.

Ron looked down and shrugged helplessly, ruffling his unruly red hair in obvious frustration. "I guess I just wanted to find out once and for all who I really wanted...And I knew that the only way I could do that was to face AJ once more and talk to her about it. That way, I

wouldn't be fooling myself *and* Lavender if I did..." He said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"So you broke up with her so you could see if you had made the right choice or not? You're going to take a chance with Potter?" Seamus asked, looking like he wanted to smack Ron upside the head. Ron nodded miserably, rubbing his temples in response.

"It's better than cheating right? At least I'm being true to my feelings...I just want to be sure of how I feel for both girls before I get into an actual serious relationship." Ron spoke softly, unaware of the misty-eyed, admiring look he was receiving from Hermione at his noble words.

*I can understand why Potter would have a thing for Ron... Despite being such a hot-tempered redhead...He truly is a wonderful gentleman with such admirable respect for women...Just like his father...* Hermione thought proudly, shaking her head in amusement at her own thoughts.

*I myself would have loved to fall for a guy like him...* She mused but she shook the thought away instantly, not wanting to reflect on the subject. Harry may be no noble prince charming like Ron but he possessed the quality that mattered the most to her—he was the guy she *loved* and that alone was reason enough for her to be satisfied with herself as well.

"You idiot...Lavender was bloody beautiful! You were willing to risk losing *her* for someone you weren't sure of liking?!" He pointed out but the look he had gotten from Hermione silenced him immediately.

Soothingly, she placed a gentle hand on Ron's shoulders and gave him a smile. "I think you made the right choice, Ron. That was very selfless of you to think like that... I...I admire you for it...Unlike *some* people I know." She said, nodding at him in respect before glaring at Seamus.

Ron couldn't help but roll his eyes, looking highly amused. "And I hear this from the girl who was secretly dating one of the biggest assholes in the school." He scoffed, causing Hermione to punch him on the arm and Seamus to laugh loudly.

"Shut up!" She snapped but an affectionate smile lit up her face beautifully as she thought of what that comment had just meant. *Ron and Seamus...They don't hate me...They...They actually don't hate me for what happened... It seems I misunderstood them after all...* She thought, smiling wider.

"So...You...You guys really don't hate me for falling in love with Harry?" She asked again timidly, watching their faces with a nervous look on her face. Ron and Seamus both cringed at the name.

Ron made a childish face, sticking his tongue out at her. "Ew... She wuvs swimy, icky, swytherinny Hawwy... She's got his germs now..." He teased, causing Hermione to growl and swat him hard on the head, resulting in all three of them collapsing into light laughter once again.

"Hermione...I'll tell you this *one last time*. We may never get used to or *like* the idea of you dating our worst enemy in the school but we won't hold that against you. You're our best friend and we still care about you, you know." Ron sobered, giving her a grin.

Hermione couldn't have wiped the smile on her own face if she tried. "My god...I had you two wrong...I had you two so wrong and I'm so sorry..." She admitted, leaning over and giving the redhead a hug.

Ron colored but coughed and patted her back awkwardly as he did, allowing a small smile to light up his face. "Yeah, yeah, don't mention it Hermione." He said, nodding at her.

Seamus gave Hermione a mock glare, drawing her attention back to him. "Hey...Don't I get one too? I swear, you have the worst favoritism..." He complained, causing the brunette to laugh and hug him as well, punching him lightly on the shoulder.

"Thanks you guys... I thought for sure you were going to freak out...Especially the way it all came out yesterday." She said, giving the two of them a sheepish smile. Ron and Seamus both paled at the memory, shaking their heads in turn.

"Well...Your...er...*boyfriend* certainly likes to put on a show... How is he now anyway? Hopefully those punches sorted out a few of those

kinks in his over-inflated head.” Ron kidded lightly though Hermione sensed a tone of bitterness in his voice.

She sighed and nodded in response, giving the redheaded a pointed look. “He’s *fine* now Ron. I’m going to visit him later during lunch time to check up on his condition once more...He should be getting released by the end of the day.” She explained, laughing at the disappointed looks on their faces.

“How did the Slytherins take it? Your coming out I mean...” Seamus asked curiously, settling himself down one of the couches near the fireplace to warm himself. Ron plopped down right beside him, both boys looking up at her for the answer.

Hermione blinked and thought about it for a brief moment, recalling how, *surprisingly*, Harry’s fellow Slytherin friends had helped him out the other day during the gang-up despite the scandalous coming out of their relationship. It seems she had also formed false perceptions of Slytherin loyalty as well.

Well, perhaps she couldn’t really say that *all* the students, particularly the Slytherins accepted their relationship right away. She had a strong gut feeling that the only reason the other Slytherins weren’t attacking or mocking her anymore in the corridors was mainly because of their fear of Harry’s anger on them but she pushed the thought away.

She had been hoping to think of their new silence and....somewhat in a bizarre way—*respect* for her as something natural and *not* forced by the consequence of them facing Harry. She knew that was definitely reaching far beyond she was capable of. It seems that whenever she passed the corridors now, she felt glares and spiteful eyes on her and when she braved enough to turn around and face them; she saw the sneering, resentful faces of not only Slytherin girls but girls from other houses as well.

Ironically, Hermione knew that they were too afraid to spite her for it. Surprisingly enough, the Slytherins did *not* blame Harry *nor* Draco for what had happened. They hadn’t shunned Harry off like they did Blaise when he admitted that he fell in love with a Hufflepuff.



It was almost as if...they were afraid of pushing Harry away from their family. It was like they were afraid of the possibility of Harry not being one of their leaders and the thought was enough for them to tolerate Harry's decision altogether, despite their disapproval for it.

There was no doubt about it now. Hermione knew all about the way they thought. The Slytherins were always *cowards*. They were afraid of not having a powerful leader like Harry or Draco to protect them. They were afraid of losing a model image or symbol...They couldn't handle not having someone to look up to.

They hid behind those in power and authority for them to feel proud of themselves. It was kind of pathetic in a Gryffindor's opinion really but Hermione couldn't have cared less. After all, she was proudly enough—a *Gryffindor* and she needn't be concerned with those problems.

Instead though, the Slytherins blamed everything on *her*. She wasn't stupid. She heard the rumors going around about her now. They were all saying how much of a manipulative and conniving bitch she was in getting their champion to fall for her.

They all honestly believed that she had Harry under some kind of love spell, which Hermione was sure was Pansy Parkinson's doing. They didn't want to believe that Harry had really fallen for her on his own will. They were certain or maybe more appropriately—*desperately hoping* that one day, Harry will snap out of the spell soon enough.

*Okay, so they still hate and disapprove of me. So what? They think I'm some kind of 'bad influence' on their leader and that I'm dragging him down. Again, so what? At least they're ignoring me now instead of mocking me.* Hermione thought to herself, shaking her head as Pansy Parkinson's words echoed in her thoughts from that morning.

### **Flashback**

*"Damn you, Granger... No one had ever managed to lay a finger on our Harry before you came. He never would have been put into such a situation if it hadn't been for you! It's your fault he got hurt! This never would have happened if you had stayed away from him in the*

*first place!” Pansy shrieked at her just as Hermione had arrived in their respective classroom for her first class that morning.*

*Lila merely sniffed beside her, nodding in agreement while the other Slytherins taking the same class behind them kept their silence, almost as if they were afraid of backing the two up in any way. AJ was one of them, keeping her head buried in her book as she refused to acknowledge any of them.*

*“How could you do this Granger? Why can’t you Gryffindors stay on your own turf and not mess around with our men?! Do you know how much we sacrifice for ourselves just for the hope of a guy like Harry ever really taking us seriously? And here you come along and with just one snap, have him wrapped around your precious little finger!” She had raged, her eyes tear-streaked as she spoke.*

*Hermione had given a laugh, her eyes glinting in a bitter anger that would have made any death eater step away in fear.*

*“You think getting someone like Harry was an easy ‘snap’, Parkinson?! Huh? You don’t even know half of what I’ve been through...Of what he’s put me through just to get this far so don’t you tell me about sacrifices... You don’t even know what the word means.” she hissed, turning away and calmly taking her seat next to Lavender.*

*“Oh I know all about sacrifice, Granger... And don’t you think for one second that we’re going to sacrifice Harry for a pathetic mudblood like you.” Pansy answered calmly, her voice cold and threatening.*

*Hermione surprised herself when she only laughed, finding that the harsh crude insults didn’t have its usual effect on her anymore.*

*“Oh don’t you worry... You still have your fearless Slytherin champion... I’m not going to take him away from his house loyalty. If you all must know, your champion being so damn loyal to your house was one of the reasons we almost didn’t work out.” Hermione pointed out, keeping her eyes trained firmly on the blackboard.*

*“I hope you know that this isn’t going to last, Granger... You and Harry are worlds apart... Your problems now are only the beginning.*

*Your worlds will never coincide...Pretty soon, you're going to have to wake up and realize that life isn't some sweet, romantic fairy tale...You may have Harry now...but what about tomorrow?" Pansy pointed out and Hermione found that though she didn't want to admit it, the girl had a point.... A very strong, convincing point.*

*"We'll just have to wait and see then, won't we Parkinson?" Hermione answered coldly, not bothering to look at her and see the smug smile of momentary victory she knew was on the other girl's lips.*

*"Yes indeed, Granger... Think about it... Slytherin house will never accept you, you know... You have Harry fooled, no doubt... But we know better. We know what's best for him...And we certainly know that it isn't you. You're up against the odds here..." She whispered again, her tone making it sound like more or less, the conversation was over.*

*"Believe me, Parkinson... I've been up against the odds long ago..." Hermione whispered bitterly under her breath loud enough for the Slytherin to hear her. Pansy looked as though she was going to say something else when Prof. Sinistra finally walked into the room, silencing all their conversations altogether.*

### ***End of Flashback***

"Hermione?! Earth to Hermione, are you still there?"

Hermione blinked again and turned to see Seamus' incredulous gaze at her. "Hey...You okay, 'Mione? You zoned us out there..." He pointed out, laughing at the bewildered expression on her face.

She blushed, giving the Irish boy a grin before she settled herself right down next to him, avoiding their curious gazes. "I guess it's safe to say they took it pretty well... I'm thinking they're too afraid of Harry to even bother shunning him away like they did Zabini." Hermione said thoughtfully, sighing.

Ron's eyes suddenly sparkled and he gave Hermione a wicked grin, raising his eyebrows up and down. "Hey...Hermione...Now that you're Potter's girlfriend and all... Well, do you think you could let us

in on the embarrassing facts we could use to blackmail him?" He asked eagerly, giving Hermione a very un-Gryffindor-like smirk.

Hermione glared icily at him, ignoring Seamus hearty laughter.

Ron blinked, giving her his innocent, lopsided grin. "What?! Come on, 'Mione! What are best friends for anyway if they don't help you humiliate your enemy? Please??" He asked pleadingly.

Hermione just gave one final sound of irritated before she got up and stalked out of the room, rolling her eyes as she heard Ron and Seamus burst out into teasing laughter behind her.

*Boys...*

"Looks like you got another fan letter, Granger..." Draco drawled later that day during Lunch, sneering in amusement as he eyed the fluffy brown owl tapping impatiently on the window of the hospital wing.

Hermione gave him her meanest glare, her eyes narrowing just as the blonde sniggered in response, obviously very much amused at the situation. "Oh just sod off, Malfoy! You're not helping you know." She hissed at him in anger.

Draco responded by regarding her with a cold look, the hatred flashing in his silver eyes. "I'm not supposed to...*you filthy little mudblood...*" He retorted, this time causing Harry to glare at him in anger.

Hermione sighed and finally stood up to open the window, allowing the small owl to slip inside the immensely clean and *white* hospital room where she had been joined by—hard as it was to believe—Draco Malfoy and AJ Potter. *I never thought the day would come when I could actually sit in a room with all these three Slytherins and 'not' feel as though they're going to hex me any damn minute.* She thought, chuckling to herself.

She watched as the small owl dropped the large envelope onto one of the bedside tables before flying off once more, allowing her to shut the window as it did. Glancing around the room, she had to marvel at the surprising scene she saw. Harry Potter, the Slytherin champion

himself was propped up on his hospital bed with a Quidditch magazine firmly in his hands, promptly ignoring the tray of food set out in front of him.

AJ sat on one of the chairs beside him, her Transfigurations book open on her lap as she vaguely tried to struggle with the lesson, her eyebrows all fused together in obvious frustration and impatience. Draco, however, had been impatiently pacing the room for the past half hour, his eyes bored and impatient with his surroundings. Hermione watched him for a minute, shaking her head in resentment before she turned back to Harry, who gave her a smile in return.

"Another Howler, Hermione?" Harry asked casually, looking up from his Quidditch magazine to shoot her his trademark smirk, which Hermione returned briefly with a smirk of her own.

"Don't say a word, Harry." She muttered before she allowed a smile and sat back down next to him on the bed, yanking the magazine out of his hands. "Hey! I was reading that, Granger!" He snapped impatiently but Hermione just gestured to the food on his lap, giving him a pointed glare.

"*Later*, Harry. The reason I am even tolerating being in a room with all you Slytherin pricks is to make sure you get well by tomorrow. Now finish your lunch so I can go." She said wryly, rolling her eyes at the icy glare she got in return from Harry.

AJ managed a smirk as she glanced up at her as well, raising a single eyebrow in question. "I'm hurt, Granger... You mean to tell me you don't enjoy my company?" She asked in mock-insult, looking highly amused at the other girl.

Hermione broke out into a laugh, causing the Slytherin girl to instantly stiffen in intimidation. "What's so damn funny?!" She hissed out, her emerald green eyes narrowing themselves into slits.

Hermione laughed again, not being able to control herself. "*You* are, Potter. Your face is turning red and you've only been reading the same page over and over again. What ever happened to that arrogant, intelligent bitch I met in first year?" She kidded but as soon as the words had left her mouth, she wished she hadn't said them.

AJ looked just about ready to explode as she stood up instantly, her book forgotten as it fell down onto the floor. “Why you—Don’t you start with me about intelligence, *Granger*... Just because we’ve called a truce doesn’t mean you can start insulting me just like that.” She snapped back, her eyes blazing with indignation.

Hermione bit her lip, instantly regretting her words. “Er—sorry, I didn’t mean it that way, Potter. I guess all I was saying was that it was kind of ironic in a way... I—”

“Whoa...Hold on...” Harry interrupted calmly, causing the girls to glance over at him and see him and Draco smirking at them in avid interest, the latter leaning casually against the wall beside Harry’s bed.

“Don’t let the female hormones work overtime okay? I don’t think we can handle a double case of PMS. Relax, AJ.” Harry coaxed, holding in a wave of laughter as AJ cursed under her breath and sat back down again, violently opening her book once more in front of her.

“It’s not funny, okay? Do you know how hard it is to try and catch up with everyone when you’ve missed nearly all the lessons of the semester? Granger didn’t have to rub that in my face.” AJ muttered moodily, her face darkening into a grumpy scowl.

That did it. Hermione let out a sheepish smile and walked over to her, a slightly guilty look on her face. “Er...Yeah, I guess that was *my* mistake. I’m sorry about that. But don’t worry about it, Prof. McGonagall talked to me about it the other morning and she said she’ll be assigning *me* as your tutor for the last days of the semester. I’ll be helping you get back on track by then.” Hermione offered, giving AJ a friendly smile.

No such luck of course. AJ didn’t seem to look thrilled or relieved of this little piece of information as the girl looked at her as though she was a whole new different species, her eyes going ridiculously wide.

“*You’re* going to be *my* tutor?!” She screeched out, her face darkening to an interesting shade of red just as Hermione took a step back, unsure of what she was supposed to say.

“Er...Yes, but—”

“Oh I’ll bet you’re real proud now, aren’t you Hermione? You being my tutor is just another fascinating way of you showing off to me that you’re the higher student in the year. And now that I’m currently struggling to catch up, you get the benefit to *teach* me...Aw...Well, isn’t that *sweet*...” She drawled sarcastically, her pride getting the better of her.

“AJ—” Harry started but AJ wasn’t having him interrupt her again, giving Hermione a cold, insulted look which masked the humiliation Harry knew she was feeling inside.

“Thanks but *no* thanks, Hermione. I can handle myself just fine. I don’t *need* a tutor.” AJ said calmly, her voice soft but well enough to be heard. Hermione didn’t say anything after that, merely watching as the girl turned back to read her book, her cheeks red with humiliation.

Draco moved over to sit down next to her and intertwined his fingers with hers in a comforting gesture of support, looking up to give Hermione a cold sneer of dislike. “Just so you know, AJ...I didn’t mean anything bad by what I said. I would really like for us to be friends you know...Not just a silly truce... I was just hoping you’d give it a try as well.” Hermione said gently, keeping her eyes trained on AJ’s face.

AJ didn’t answer but Hermione knew she had struck a nerve somewhere. She just allowed another sigh to escape her lips before she moved over to sit by Harry again, not wanting to screw anything else up with the other girl.

A tense silence followed after that, Hermione shifting around uncomfortably as Harry squeezed her hand in comfort, his eyes still traveling carelessly across the pages of his Quidditch magazine while he occasionally spooned some of his lunch to his mouth.

*I guess this will take some serious adjusting...* Hermione thought to herself, shaking her head in dismay. She was just about to say something else to apologize to the other girl when the howler on the bedside table beside them finally exploded, causing all four students in the room to jump in surprise.

*“YOU ARE SUCH A MANIPULATIVE LITTLE SLUT! HARRY POTTER DESERVES MUCH BETTER! GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM AND FIND SOMEONE ELSE THAT WOULD SUIT A WHORE LIKE YOU!”*

As soon as the Howler had ended, it had disintegrated into ashes, causing all four students to fall into another silence once again. Then, surprisingly, Hermione broke the stillness by allowing a wave of small, hushed giggles escape her lips.

The sound was enough to startle the three Slytherins back to their senses as Harry and Draco both blinked and glanced at her in annoyance, their cold eyes unwavering. AJ, however, started laughing as well, causing Hermione to lose it altogether and collapse into laughter.

“Can we please rewind back to the phrase *‘Harry Potter deserves better’*? Since when did that jerk ever deserve *anyone* save for Pansy Parkinson?” AJ said snidely, causing Harry to raise his middle finger up at her in response.

Hermione laughed again. “I...I swear, they have *got* to stop sending me all those hate letters. It only gets either annoying or amusing... Don’t those people ever have a life?” She pointed out, wiping her eyes.

“Apparently it was devoted solely for the purpose of worshiping the most lifeless of all—Harry Potter.” Draco snorted derisively, causing Harry to finally silence them all with a glare.

“Oh *fuck off* all of you!” He snapped, making the group fall into light chuckles once again. AJ sobered and coughed loudly, drawing Hermione’s attention back to her.

“Er... Yeah...Sorry about that Granger... I guess it was just a matter of my wounded pride back there. I’m still not used to this new idea of you and me talking without wanting to curse the other into oblivion... Really sorry.” She said, offering the girl a small smile.

*Neither am I...* Hermione thought to herself as she glanced at the girl again, giving her a smile in return. “Don’t worry about it... Actually, if



the two of you would only stop making it a habit to insult someone every five minutes, I'd say you're okay..." She admitted.

Draco looked as though he was going to say something rude back in response but AJ elbowed him sharply, causing him to wince and keep his silence with a frown. "I guess I'll take that as a compliment, Granger... And if you don't mind... That whole tutor thing...I take back what I said about it. I could use a little help...I guess..." AJ said stiffly, sighing before she gave a nod.

Behind Hermione, she saw Harry give her a small smile, looking thrilled with the idea. "Great. Now that the two of you have bored the hell out of me with this, *I'd* like to speak. If that's not too much to ask of course... Conversing with *mudbloods* has never really been interesting to me." Draco piped up sarcastically, standing up from his seat.

Hermione bit her lip and promptly tried to ignore the implied insult, looking away just as Harry gave Draco a cold glare but nodded, his eyes looking frustratingly weary and worn out.

"I have to remind you, Potter. The Third task is just about to come up and I've heard from reliable sources—" Draco glanced suspiciously at Hermione, not trusting the Gryffindor one bit but Harry knew what he meant. He knew for a fact that Lucius told Draco of things that were strictly meant to be confidential to the Ministry, which is exactly the reason he used this advantage for his own benefits at times. "—That whatever dangerous plans the Dark Lord may have for you *or* AJ is going to happen during that task. Now I don't know exactly how—"

"The dark lord? Now how could any of you be certain that—"

"Granger would you please stay out of this?!" Draco blurted out, giving the Gryffindor an aggravated glance in cold acknowledgement, causing Hermione to turn an embarrassed shade of magenta. She was surprised, however, when it seemed Harry was going to tell Draco off for his rudeness, merely nodding at him in a gesture for him to continue, his cold green eyes darkening in something unreadable.

AJ stood up and yanked Hermione aside for a split second so that she could whisper something to the other girl in secret. "Granger, if

you know what's good for you, you'd do well *not* to interrupt either Harry or Draco when they're talking of serious matters like this. Just take my word for it. These two can get rather grim when talking of Lord Voldemort." She explained patiently, causing Hermione to flinch slightly at the name.

"Thanks for the warning...I'll keep that in mind." Hermione said, her eyes widening as she let AJ pull her to sit back down Draco's vacated seat and listened carefully to the two boys in front of her.

"So you're saying you think Voldemort has a spy here as well?" Harry asked Draco sharply, his eyes going sharply fierce as he eyed the other boy's facial expressions carefully.

Draco sighed and ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head. "I don't know, Harry... He *must* have...He knows of what's happening here in Hogwarts. He knows AJ has woken up and how you were badly injured...He knows nearly everything... There must be someone here spying on us for him."

Harry's eyes glinted maliciously at the thought. "I reckon it's Viktor Krum... I mean, who else could it be? That jealous bastard has been after me ever since the year started!" Harry growled, his hands clenching tightly.

Draco smirked at him, his eyes looking less than amused. "That's only because he's been putting the moves on Granger here... I doubt *Viktor Krum* could be the spy, Harry." He pointed out, giving Hermione a smug sneer.

Hermione glared right back at him, failing to see the blush on Harry's pale cheeks.

"Anyway, it can't be him okay? But... Still.. Keep a close watch on him though... I still don't trust the bastard..." Draco added darkly, a cold look forming on his handsome features.

"Viktor wouldn't have anything to do with the Dark Lord, Malfoy! Watch what you're saying!" Hermione chimed in, causing AJ to nudge her sharply in turn when both Harry and Draco turned to give her their icy glares.

“Really, Hermione? Well I think it’s absolutely touching that you trust *Viktor* so much...” Harry said spitefully, his green eyes glowing in jealousy for a minute as he gave her a cold, calculating gaze.

“Harry, think about it. Are you still jealous of him until *now*? Haven’t I proven to you enough times already who I really want to be with?” Hermione retorted in exasperation.

Harry didn’t say anything but it was obvious that she had said the right words, his form visibly relaxing as he turned away from her. Draco however, didn’t look amused as he raised an eyebrow at the two of them, highly annoyed at being interrupted.

“It couldn’t be Krum anyway... That hulking idiot wouldn’t have enough brain cells to gather to even consider him as a dark spy... Maybe it’s your ex-girlfriend, Patil, Harry.” Draco drawled derisively, causing Harry to break out into a round of sniggers.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that girl screwed Voldemort to get her way...” He said in amusement, smirking at the disgusted look on AJ’s face.

“You think it could be Mr. Crouch though? I’m a bit suspicious of the bastard...” Harry thought out loud, carefully setting his empty tray of food aside and shutting his open magazine with one swift movement.

Draco stroked his temples and shook his head, leaning casually against a wall. “No...I doubt it, Harry... You heard what Sirius—I mean...” Draco looked cautiously at Hermione in annoyance.

Harry waved it away, nodding for him to continue. “Don’t worry about it, Malfoy. Hermione knows about it, I’ve told her.” He said, smirking at the annoyed look on his best friend’s face.

“Anyway, Sirius said Crouch *loathes* the dark arts...He wouldn’t be caught dead helping the death eaters. That’s almost like an insult to the old geezer.” Draco mocked, earning another chuckle from Harry.

“Um... Can I say something?” Hermione spoke up again, once more drawing the Slytherin duo’s attention to her.

Draco didn't answer but Harry nodded, his emerald green eyes focusing peering curiously at her, causing Hermione to blush in spite of herself as she struggled to keep herself from getting lost in them before she spoke.

"I've written a letter once to Percy about what's happened here... See, I was kind of curious when Harry told me about what had happened in Prof. Snape's office so I wanted to ask Percy himself where Crouch was..." She started, her eyebrows coming together in thought.

She blinked and looked up to see all three Slytherins now listening intently to her, nearly causing her to burst out into laughter at the serious expressions on all their faces.

"Well Percy seemed really irritated actually. He said something about Mr. Crouch taking a well-deserved break...He hasn't actually seen the man but he says that he's getting his regular instructions from the owls Mr. Crouch sends in. I'm guessing that's the case since Percy is basically Mr. Crouch's number one fan...I'm pretty sure he'd know his mentor's handwriting well enough." Hermione informed them, shrugging.

Nobody answered after that, AJ looking away with a dark, brooding look in her eyes. They fell into a deep silence for a long moment before AJ finally looked up, looking intently at Draco.

"I remember now..." She whispered slowly, her eyes looking dead and lifeless as she urged the listless words out. "Remember what, AJ?" Harry asked gently, his eyes moving to rest on his twin sister as he noticed the pale look on her features.

AJ shook her head intently, looking worn out. "Not all of it... I remember what happened after the Yule Ball..." She whispered again, this time causing Draco to straighten up and walk over to kneel in front of her in concern.

"I was... I was dancing with Ron at first... I remember... Draco had just left...He had honestly believed that I didn't love him..." She spoke softly, her voice sounding far-off as she absently raised a hand to stroke Draco's cheek.

“And then... I followed after him... I saw him on the balcony... Him and Padma Patil... They were kissing and I...” Draco visibly flinched at the harsh memory, his hand tightening around hers. “I left...I ran back to the dungeons...*alone*...” AJ continued, biting her lip.

Hermione listened carefully, shifting around in uneasiness as she felt the hairs on the back of her neck raise up at the tone of AJ’s voice.

“I didn’t really see anything...I just ran all the way back to the dungeons... I... I didn’t realize that I wasn’t alone in the room...” She said, her eyes lighting up as the events suddenly all came pouring back into her.

“I felt so lost at that time... I wasn’t myself, I—I was out of control! I...I kept smashing things...I...I was having an inner struggle with myself... And then, I remember...I...I—” AJ stopped abruptly, emerald green orbs widening in realization.

“Go on...” Draco whispered into her ear, giving the delicate part a soft kiss in encouragement before AJ spoke again.

“I punched the mirror... It shattered and I... I fell down onto the floor... But I hadn’t cut my wrists then...*no*...I never cut my wrists. I remember Madam Pomfrey telling me I did but I had no intention of doing such a thing... Instead...I remember that I heard a voice inside with me...taunting me... I swear, it was so damn frightening...” She managed to say, her voice trembling.

“Who was it? Was it Mr. Crouch” Harry asked sharply, his hand now tightening against the hand Hermione now held in his own.

AJ sighed and buried her head in Draco’s shoulder, closing her eyes in thought. “I...I don’t know, Harry. I can’t remember who it was...I don’t know if it was him...Or if it wasn’t... All I remember after that was that a spell had been cast on me... It felt as though a voice was inside my head...telling me to drink the potion he had in his hand... It was almost dream-like...the spell... Like being in a trance...” She murmured into Draco’s shoulder, her voice slightly muffled.

“*Imperio*...” Hermione whispered, causing AJ to snap her head back up and give her a wide-eyed glance.

“What did you say?” She asked, her eyes riveting to focus intently on Hermione’s unsure features.

“The Imperius Curse... The spell you said was the Imperius curse...wasn’t it?” She asked, managing a half-shrug.

AJ nodded frantically. “That was it! ‘*Imperio*’... That was what he said... Yes, I remember now! That was why I drank the potion... Anything after that is a blur... I recall him deepening the cut to my wrist but that was it...” She finished, looking terribly exhausted.

Harry nodded, sitting back down onto the bed just as Draco leaned over to give AJ one kiss on the forehead before standing back up to lean on the same wall again, burying his face in his hand.

“Well, we know one thing. That guy...whoever he is...He’s going to be attacking next during the Third Task... And he’s definitely here at Hogwarts...Whoever he is; he isn’t playing with us anymore. We’re going to have to be careful... All of us...Even you, Hermione... I’m pretty sure Voldemort knows about me and you by now.” Harry said softly, keeping his eyes trained on the ground.

Hermione nodded silently, slowly standing up and walking over to sit beside him, allowing Harry to wrap his arms around her slender waist as she did. “I’m not afraid of him...” She said softly, leaning into his embrace just as Harry gently tilted her face up to meet his lips in a gentle, chaste kiss.

“You shouldn’t be... I won’t ever let him do anything to you...” He whispered sensually against her ear, trailing his lips over the sensitive area for a long, agonizing moment before he claimed her lips again, his fingers going to stroke her cheek.

Hermione was just about to wrap her arms around his neck in return when an annoyed and aggravated cough interrupted them, causing the couple to break apart to find a sickened Draco and a disturbed but amused AJ staring back at them.

“Please don’t make out in front of us... I *don’t* enjoy watching when I very well know I am capable of *doing*.” Draco said derisively, giving

AJ a smirk before he turned back to see Hermione disentangling herself from Harry, a furious blush on her face.

“Anyway... Just to tell you, Potter. Prof. Snape specifically requested that I help you with your third task training these next few weeks so be prepared for that. I reckon learning a few...er...*advanced spells* should do the trick.” Draco continued, running a hand through his hair.

“Just don’t let that Skeeter bitch catch you unless you want another rumor about the two of you secretly learning the dark arts or something.” AJ scoffed, causing both Harry and Draco to meet each other’s eye in nervousness.

“Speaking of that annoying reporter, I’ve been wanting to ask ever since how she’s been getting all those *interviews* from you Slytherins when she’s supposed to be banned from the school...” Hermione suddenly piped up, giving Draco an accusing glare.

Draco merely raised an eyebrow snobbishly, shaking his head. “Now why would I tell you?” He retorted but at the look on Harry’s face, he relented and gritted his teeth in frustration.

“*Fine.* I’ll admit that I personally gave her an interview for that first article about Harry but I had no idea how she was able to get something out of me for the second. I *did* say that line, yes, but I sure as hell didn’t tell *Skeeter* that.” Draco said, giving Hermione a taunting sneer.

Hermione nearly exploded in anger. “*Liar!* You were the one who sold off all those lies about me and Harry in the first place! You stupid, good-for-nothing, manipulative asshole!” She accused angrily, her brown eyes flashing like lightning bolts.

Draco’s eyebrows shot up in indignation. “Hey, fuck you mudblood! For your goddamn information, I do not *need* to sell off *anything* for money and I did *not* spread those rumors about you or Harry. I—”

“Bullshit, Malfoy!” Hermione interrupted, her anger seething through her as she remembered how relentlessly Draco had taunted her after that second article a couple of days ago.

“Hey!”

Hermione stopped and turned to face Harry, who was now giving the both of them a weary glare. “Hermione, if Draco says he didn’t do it. He *didn’t* do it. Give it a rest; let that woman have her say. I don’t really care...” Harry said tiredly, yawning to himself.

Draco gave Hermione a smug smile before he finally turned and pulled a dazed AJ to her feet, giving Harry a curt nod as he did. “I’ve had enough of this. I’ll see you tomorrow, Harry. I think we’ll leave you two alone now before I explode with irritation.” He said derisively, yanking a reluctant AJ to the door.

“I guess I’ll be going too. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, okay Harry?” She said, leaning over to give her twin brother a peck on the cheek.

Turning to Hermione, the two girls exchanged a brief nod before AJ smirked and patted Hermione benignly on the back. “See you around, Hermione.” She said, nodding once more before she finally allowed Draco to drag her impatiently out of the room.

As soon as they were gone, Hermione finally turned to Harry, surprised to see him yawning once more and lying back down onto the bed. “Watching you squabble with AJ and Draco is a bit tiring you know...” He pointed out, causing Hermione to break out into a sheepish smile.

“I’m sorry about that, Harry... But why don’t *you* try hanging out with me and my friends as well and see if *you* don’t get your own...*squabbles*.” She pointed out, snuggling down onto the bed beside him.

Harry smirked but didn’t say anything in response, merely closing his eyes and letting one lean arm wrap possessively around Hermione’s waist, pulling her body closer to his. For a long silent moment, it was as if Hermione had fallen into a reflective lapse beside him but that thought was soon extinguished from his mind when Hermione spoke up again, her voice sounding thoughtful.

“But seriously though, Harry... How else do you think Rita Skeeter could be getting all those personal information about us? I mean, she



listens in on our private conversations! Do you think she could have been using an invisibility cloak?" She ranted, causing Harry to groan loudly in response.

"I don't know, Hermione..." Came the muffled response after he had buried his head onto his pillow.

"I've asked Prof. Moody—his eye can see through Invisibility cloaks, you know—and he says he hasn't seen her anywhere so she probably used some other clever method to get in... Do you have any idea how she could have gotten past all those barriers?" Hermione pressed again, poking the Slytherin slightly in the ribs.

Harry flinched and let out a mock growl, burying his head deeper into the pillows. "Hermione, is there any point at all in getting you to stop talking about Rita Skeeter?" He asked, his voice a low growl as he spoke but Hermione didn't seem to notice.

"No! I want to know how she's been finding all those things about me... I swear, I'm not going to let her get away with it! I'm going to get back at her for all those private information she exposed about me...*us!*" She said stubbornly, her face scowling at the thought.

"Hermione..." Harry groaned loudly, his voice now obviously pleading and irritated at the same time.

"Could she have had us all bugged? No... According to *Hogwarts, A History* muggle electronic devices all go haywire around Hogwarts... Too much magic is in the air... I reckon she's using magic to eavesdrop somehow, Harry... I have to find out how...If it's illegal, ooh...I'll have her..." Hermione speculated, stroking her chin.

"Hermione, for the last time—"

"I wonder who she's planning on going after next... I reckon she's going to be—" Hermione never got to finish her sentence as Harry finally growled and tackled her, pinning her body down onto the bed with his own and using his hands to keep her from struggling.

He smirked at the scandalized look on her face and leaned forward to trail his lips over to her ear, using just the right amount of movement

to make the girl squirm underneath him. "When's your next class?" He whispered, his breath tickling her ear.

Hermione flushed in desire and watched as Harry pulled back to stare at her expectantly, one eyebrow raised sensually in superiority. "In about an hour..." Hermione responded, her voice breathless and heavy with lust.

Harry chuckled and leaned forward to kiss her neck, nibbling lightly on the tender flesh as he did. "Well then, I'll just have to think of my own creative ways to keep you from talking about Rita Skeeter..." He whispered again, causing a delightful shiver to run down her spine.

Hermione smiled and raised her hand to rest it on his firm back, leaning forward to give the Slytherin a sensual whisper of her own. "Well then, you had *better* hope Madam Pomfrey doesn't walk in on us, Slytherin champion." She murmured seconds before he claimed her lips, all thoughts forgotten as the two slipped into the hazy world of their desire once more.

Several weeks later, AJ soon found herself listening to Hermione drone on and on in front of her about some uninteresting war between the vampires and the werewolves sometime during the 18th century, occasionally pausing to allow the Slytherin to take down some important notes before proceeding.

Frankly, to be honest with herself, she hated this. Just the very thought of *Hermione Granger* being the one to teach her was insulting enough for her pride as it is. But having people gawking around them right now in the library was enough to make her lose it altogether.

She blinked and turned her head just in time to glare icily at a group of whispering Ravenclaw third years sitting across from them, their gazes disbelieving as they watched the two well-known rivals converse. At seeing AJ's eyes on them, the group turned away hastily and burst into hushed giggles, looking incredibly pleased with themselves.

AJ sighed and turned back to Hermione, who was now gesturing to a group of complex numbers in her notebook, which was apparently

their Arithmancy homework for that week. She nodded to indicate she understood so the girl could continue, writing similar equations onto a blank sheet of paper just as AJ fell into another thoughtful lapse to herself.

As though it was unavoidable, her mind began drifting off to the weekend before, eyes glazing over as the vivid images of her date with Draco began surging through her mind. She had been surprised; to say the least, to find that the Draco she was with during that particular day was a completely different person from the Draco she grew to know during their younger years...

*For starters, he was a complete gentleman...* AJ thought, blushing as she recalled how Draco had made sure to follow all the necessary decorum needed for the proper date. It was completely unexpected... AJ had never seen that side of him before.

Oh they had their arguments during the night, there was no denying that but now, it was more of a light, playful teasing with a hint of flirtatious humor rather than his normal aggravating and insulting comments. And it was during this that AJ found that...well... he could actually be quite charming and pleasant when he wanted to be. She understood how he was able to charm his way through all his past girlfriends now that she's seen *this* side of him.

They had started out kind of awkwardly at first though... AJ had been all tense and nervous about the entire evening and not even Harry's usual snide and familiar jibes could do anything to relax her twitching form. It seemed that Draco had planned out the entire evening himself without her knowledge and when he met her that afternoon; AJ seriously had doubts whether he had any wrinkles in his robes.

Of course, she had been heavily annoyed that he had planned to take her to the most expensive, and in *her* opinion, *boring* places in the village so instead of going along with his plans, she had asked for a compromise.

AJ smiled at the memory as the image of Draco's horrified face came into her mind when she had dragged him first into one of the pet shops in Hogsmeade. The blonde was obviously not fond of animals,

*that* was for sure. It was amusing actually... Draco Malfoy himself found scowling and pouting at her inside a *pet shop*...

Of course that was before AJ had plopped a fluffy, drooling niffler into his hands, which had caused Draco to wince adorably in disgust as the said animal began sniffing his robes...The thought brought still a light giggle to AJ's lips...

Next, she had let him bring her to this classy restaurant where apparently, he and Harry were well recognized... For what reason, she really didn't want to find out. To be honest, she hadn't really enjoyed the stuffy atmosphere in there but soon after, with the help of Draco's handsome smile and antics, she had relaxed and allowed herself to enjoy his company. It was probably the first time they had ever gotten through a meal without going at each other's throats.

AJ blushed as she remembered the intimate conversations Draco had brought up at the end of the meal, his eyes glowing with a sense of sincerity that AJ had never seen before. She shook her head, clearing the thoughts way... It was making her extremely uncomfortable...

The best part of the evening was probably when she had begged him to buy them some ice cream...Draco had been annoyed at first, complaining that she was such a child but had obliged, buying her a cup of *chocolate swirl*, and smirking as he watched her eat it up while they walked along the garden trails of the village.

Several other Hogwarts couples had seen and greeted the two with admiring glances and smiles—Harry and Hermione included, whom AJ had seen sitting by the main Hogsmeade fountain with surprisingly, Ron and Seamus. Harry had been sporting a bored and aggravated scowl on his face as he tried to sit with them while his arms were wrapped around Hermione, who had been laughing at something Ron and Seamus were saying.

Draco had smirked wider at the sight of him and commented something about 'exciting company' which had made his best friend break out into a laugh and Ron and Seamus to nearly go after him in a heated fury if Hermione hadn't held them back. AJ had cursed and drew him away before anything else happened; unknowingly leading

them into one of those beautiful private paths where she knew most of the Hogwarts students had been known to go whenever they wanted to make out...

The memory of it all still brought an uncomfortable blush to her pale cheeks...

### ***Flashback***

*"I swear, you can really be such a jerk most of the time, Draco..." AJ muttered under her breath as she stopped walking, looking around their surroundings in sudden awe.*

*The path itself was illuminated enough by magical lights for them to see where they were going but other than that, they were completely alone, nothing around them except for the soft sounds of nature and the bustle of trees and bushes.*

*Draco was about to reply something equally sarcastic when he stopped as well, his eyes going wide with surprise as he recognized their surroundings. "Why Potter... I didn't know you were that type of girl..." He murmured, stepping forward to wrap his arms around her waist and pull her to him so that her back was resting against his chest.*

*AJ shifted around nervously and eased herself out of his arms, turning around so she could give him a nervous smile. "I'm not, Draco... Don't take this the wrong way..." She managed a laugh before she took another scoop of her sundae, lifting a spoonful to her lips.*

*She failed to see Draco's intense gaze on her mouth as she licked the ice cream off her lips, his eyes darkening with a shade of deep desire as he stepped forward again, placing a hand over the hand she had on her sundae cup.*

*"Draco?" She asked in confusion, blinking when the blonde slowly eased the cup out of her hand and took his own spoonful, giving her a reckless grin.*

*"You don't mind do you?" He murmured, lifting the scoop of ice scream to his smirking lips and sensually putting it into his mouth, more than aware of the growing blush on AJ's face as watched him.*

*She shook her head dumbly, taking a step back as Draco gave a murmur of contentment and lifted another scoop to his lips, this time making sure AJ's green orbs were focused on the ample mound of chocolate as he did before slowly easing the scoop into his mouth once more.*

*"Mmm...This is really good, Potter... Good choice... Mmm... Want one?" He asked, hiding a superior smirk when he saw AJ's eyes clouded in hunger as she watched him ease another spoon into his mouth.*

*She nodded wordlessly, throat too tight for her to speak as she watched Draco carefully swirl the sundae in front of her and lift a single scoop up until it was in level with her mouth, teasing her slightly for a minute by simply letting the cream tinge her lips with the slowest movement before finally letting her savor the taste.*

*Draco gave a small secret smile to himself before he leaned forward and pressed his lips onto hers, tasting the delicious, enticing flavor of the ice cream with just a hint of AJ's own unique taste before pulling back and seeing the glazed look in her eyes.*

*"Draco... We should probably be heading back to the castle now..." She whispered softly, trying to resist but Draco shook his head, gesturing to the half-empty swirl of chocolate he still held in his hand.*

*"We should at least finish this first...Don't you think?" He teased, lifting another spoonful to her mouth but instead of easing it into the girl's lips, he 'accidentally' missed his aim and spread the chocolate onto the girl's jaw, staining AJ's pale cheek messily as he did.*

*AJ stiffened as Draco chuckled seductively, shaking his head at his own blunder. "Whoops...Sorry about that, Potter...Let me get that for you." He whispered, not giving her a chance to react before he leaned over and used his lips to kiss the chocolate away, purposely lingering on the sensitive parts he knew would drive AJ crazy.*

*AJ felt her knees buckle underneath her as she pushed him away again, barely unable to control the now obvious lust and need in her voice. "Draco, come on. Finish the rest of the ice cream and let's go." She urged, looking away.*

*Draco chuckled again, giving the girl a mischievous smile. "Okay then... We'll go back. As soon as we finish the rest of this half-eaten cup of ice cream..." He murmured before using the scoop to smear another amount of ice cream on her neck, backing the girl up until she felt her back pressed up against a tree...*

### **FLASHBACK**

AJ shifted again, now fully aware how red her face was. Fortunately, they hadn't gotten any farther than intimate kissing and for that, AJ was quite thankful for. This was exactly what she had been afraid of from the very beginning... Draco had the power to control her... To manipulate her like that frankly because he *knew* he could... And that fact alone scared her... Scared her into thinking of what else he could do to her...

"Potter? Potter, dammit! Potter would you mind listening to me, here?!" Hermione exploded angrily, finally drawing AJ's attention back to her....along with every other student in the library as well.

AJ gave Hermione a fairly sheepish smile as Madam Pince rounded on the both of them, her beady eyes going to rest disapprovingly on Hermione. "Ms. Granger, if you do not understand the policies of *silence* within a *library*, I suggest you take your *gossip session* somewhere else." She snapped coldly, causing Hermione to wince in shame.

"I'm really sorry, Madame Pince...It won't happen again, I promise." Hermione said, biting her lip as the librarian gave her one more conspicuous glance before turning to walk away amidst the sniggers of the Slytherins around them.

AJ glanced up and gave her housemates a poisonous look, causing all of them to cough and look away, not wanting to upset her. "I—I'm...I uh—"

“Wow...*Thanks a lot*, Potter... It’s nice to know that the person I am currently taking time to tutor effectively doesn’t even have the initiative to bother being *interested* in what I’m saying. Thank you *very much*.” Hermione said sarcastically, giving AJ a withering glance before she stood up and began gathering her things hastily.

“Look, Granger, don’t you get all worked-up and superior on me, I—”

Before AJ got to say anything else, Hermione had stalked out of the room in a heated huff, her face currently formed into a grim expression of anger as she walked out of the library. AJ watched her, rolling her eyes as she sighed and began gathering her things as well, running a hand through her disheveled dark hair.

*Great...Just great...* She thought moodily as she slowly pushed back her chair and made to walk out of the library after her, keeping a pissed-off expression on her face in case anyone wanted to follow.

*So I pissed Granger off... Could this day get any worse?* She thought, pinching her nose before she adjusted the strap of her book bag and began heading off slowly towards the Great Hall, her slow footsteps clicking loudly in the empty corridor.

Just as she turned the corner, she managed to bump herself right into Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones, the former giving the Slytherin an apprehensive smile in turn. “Hey, AJ...” She greeted, earning a warning nudge from Susan beside her.

AJ blinked, taken back in surprise at the greeting before she gave the girl a curt nod in reply, and stepped aside to give way for the two to pass ahead of her. Susan looked surprised at this but said nothing, only chattering away as she led Hannah down to the Great Hall as well.

*Merlin...What is this...? I’m becoming soft or what?* AJ thought, shaking her head as she continued on walking behind them and entered the slowly filling Great Hall, more than aware of the numerous eyes that riveted on her just as she stepped inside.

*Ignore them...* She willed herself silently as she plopped down on the Slytherin table next to Blaise, who turned to give her a grin in greeting.



“Hey Potter. How was your first tutoring session with Granger?” He asked, chomping on an apple as he gestured to the brown-haired Gryffindor across the room.

AJ smirked when she looked up and found Hermione pointedly glaring at her for a split second before turning away to talk to her friends, pointedly ignoring her. “Not so bad I guess...Until it got to the end when I started zoning her out... She got pissed, that’s for sure. She walked out on me right then and there in front of everyone.” AJ said, helping herself to some mash potatoes while Blaise laughed beside her.

“That bad huh? You were probably annoying her by using your usual self—an annoying bitch.” He retorted rudely, causing AJ to stomp on his foot in retaliation. “*Fuck!* Dammit, Potter!” He cursed, moving away from her just as AJ smirked again and shoved a spoonful of potatoes in her mouth.

Blaise grumbled something under his breath but didn’t bother fighting back; turning back to his own lunch in silence before AJ finally spoke up again, looking around in question. “By the way, where are Harry and Draco? I haven’t seen them all morning.” She asked, her eyebrows fusing in concern.

Blaise gave a derisive snort in response, taking a long swig of his pumpkin juice before answering.

“I doubt you’ll be seeing them for the entire day except for class. Draco and some of the other guys have been helping Harry train for the Third Task since this morning. I’m thinking they’re pretty serious about it, even Prof. Snape is making appearances with them.” He explained, giving her a shrug.

AJ glanced at him carefully. “But...then... Why aren’t you there training with them?” She asked softly, causing Blaise to turn and give her a spiteful glare. “Why do you think, Ms. Perfect?” He snapped back, violently slamming his fist on the table in anger.

AJ flinched, biting her lip in regret. “Stupid question...Sorry... Forget I ever said that.” She murmured foolishly, turning away to hide the embarrassed flush on her face. Blaise didn’t answer her, calmly

taking another bite of his food before he sighed and buried his face in his hands, nodding.

“No, *I’m* sorry, AJ... I guess I’m still a bit ticked off by how everyone else was able to accept Potter and Granger’s coming out as a couple and *still* be utterly revolted by the idea of me dating Hannah.” He admitted in a pained whisper, turning away from her.

AJ nodded and leaned over to squeeze his shoulder comfortingly, managing an encouraging smile. “Hey...Don’t worry about it so much, Blaise. It’ll all die within a couple more weeks anyway. Trust me. You and Hannah will soon be *old news* and everyone will just grow out of it.” She told him, rolling her eyes.

Blaise raised an eyebrow at her. “You think so?” He asked, managing a weak smile at the annoyed glare AJ gave him. “*Of course* I do. Have I ever been *wrong*, Zabini?” She pointed out smugly, looking extremely proud of herself.

Blaise snorted, smirking at her. “I can name a few instances, Potter. One including you daydreaming about getting together with a certain *redheaded weasel*, if I might add. And look where you are now...With a *blonde ferret* instead. You certainly do have a liking for *animals* don’t you?” He taunted, causing the other Slytherin to color at the thought.

“*Hush.*” Was all she said before she promptly turned back to stuffing her face with her lunch, getting Blaise to laugh in spite of himself. He was just about to do the same thing when Pansy and Lila both plopped themselves down across the table from them, both still obviously engaged in a loud conversation.

“...And then I heard that they’ve been seeing each other ever since...They’ve just been keeping it a secret from everyone else. Can you imagine? A secret relationship with a *Hufflepuff*? How pathetic...” Pansy drawled, her eyes traveling to Blaise but Blaise just smirked back calmly at her, not at all intimidated by her words.

“It’s *definitely* pathetic...And *traitorous* too. Why I won’t be surprised if AJ here *comes out* as well with her own...let’s say *secret relationships*—plural—with other Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs...I mean,

we already saw her with *Diggory* at the Yule Ball. Who knows? She might have already slept with half the Hufflepuffs already before him.” Lila added loudly, causing Pansy to erupt into laughter.

AJ colored again but kept her head down coolly, not wanting the other girl to see how much her words affected her.

“Well, personally I *wouldn’t* be surprised, you know. I mean... You *are* who you hang around with, right? Maybe Zabini and Potter both have their own sick liking for Hufflepuffs... I don’t know what Draco ever saw in her... She probably has him under a love spell as well...” Lila added, giving AJ a sugary smile.

AJ tensed up but once again, didn’t answer, meeting Blaise’s own vengeful eyes next to her before she turned and continued on ignoring the two, taking a long satisfying sip of her pumpkin juice.

Blaise however, didn’t have the same amount of patience. “Has it ever occurred to you, *Perrine*, that you are talking about one of your girl friends? Or should I say...one of your former friends? Is that easy to forget your friendship like that?” He hissed softly to her, his voice dangerously calm and sensual as he spoke.

Pansy and Lila both smirked, looking at each other before bursting into smug chuckles. “Well that *may be* the case, Zabini... AJ *may* have been one of us back when she was still sane but now...well...*Things change...People change...*” Pansy spoke pleasantly, giving AJ another smile.

The other girl finally growled in response, her hand tightening around her goblet. “Yeah? Well I’m *glad* I’ve changed, Parkinson. At least now I’m aware how much of a shallow, insensitive bitch I was before just by watching the two of you.” She spat back, causing both girls to narrow their eyes in insult.

“You see what we mean? Now *that’s* not the AJ that we used to know and love... *This* AJ is nothing but an arrogant, self-righteous whore who thinks she’s better than everyone else...” Pansy countered back, giving her a sneer.

AJ didn't flinch this time, merely looking up until she was gazing right back at Pansy's cold eyes, a confident smile on her face.

*"That AJ is gone. Forever. I won't be your helpless, snobby, meek little princess anymore...Those days are finished. And just to tell you, I do not think I'm better than everyone else...If you know what's good for you; you'd do well to stay out of this AJ's business."* She murmured sweetly with a hint of warning in her voice, causing a shiver to run down Pansy's spine.

Before either of the two girls could say anything else, AJ smiled brightly again and turned back to talk to Blaise, leaving the two Slytherin girls staring at her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Blaise couldn't have wiped the amused grin off his face if he tried. He chuckled as AJ gave him a wink and turned to carefully slide another spoonful of mash potatoes in her mouth, ignoring Pansy and Lila altogether.

It took a while for either of the two girls to find their voice again.

"It's amazing isn't it? How being in a godforsaken coma could transform someone into such a pompous, ungrateful bitch... I seriously hope she gets what's coming to them...Well her along with that mudblood Granger and Abbott..."

It was Lila who spoke this time and now, AJ was completely aware that every Slytherin sitting at the table was now watching them avidly with amused eyes, clearly not wanting to take any sides whatsoever.

But AJ had just about it enough as it is. Without warning, she bolted right up from her seat and did the only possible thing that had registered in her mind at that very moment—She pulled her fist back as far as it could go and punched Lila as hard as she could right in the nose, immediately causing the girl to stumble from her seat and collapse onto the floor.

Nothing could have prevented the reactions that took place next. Blaise's eyes had gone comically wide and a loud laugh finally escaped his mouth while the other Slytherins all practically had the same reaction, everyone in the Great Hall now focused intently on AJ.

Even the guest students—those from *Beauxbatons* and *Durmstrang*, who were all now sitting in a specially requested table for themselves to prevent anymore *quarrels* with the other Hogwarts students—particularly the *Slytherins*, were watching them in curiosity.

AJ barely noticed them, glaring icily at the huddled figure of Lila on the floor, who was now clutching her bleeding nose in pain and cowering away from her in a whole new fear they had never seen before.

Pansy was now staring at her in complete shock, her jaw hanging open in horror at the scene she had just witnessed while the other students in the Great Hall stared on in silence, not daring to believe that AJ Potter, the supposedly *nonviolent* Potter twin had just dared to do such a thing.

Hermione had long stopped conversing with Ron and Seamus and was now currently gaping at the AJ in disbelief. *Merlin's beard... She's actually finally found the guts to put those girls in their place...What brought that on?* She thought, watching as the Slytherin finally turned at the sound of Prof. McGonagall's face from the Staff table.

"Ms. Potter! How could you—I'm surprised at you! Displaying such an open act of violence in front of everyone...and in front of our *guests!! Detention!* And 10 points from Slytherin!" She shrieked in shock, causing AJ to blink and finally glance around the hall in surprise.

Turning back to Lila, who was now being helped up by Pansy, AJ gave them both another cold look of resentment before she gathered her things and finally began walking out of the room, her robe swishing behind her.

Hermione stared after her, her eyes still fairly wide before she turned to look at Prof. Dumbledore's reaction from the table, surprised to see the headmaster's eyes twinkling in something resembling satisfaction and relief instead of disapproval.

*Why is he looking like that? It's almost as if he was expecting AJ to react that way or something...* She thought, blinking again before she finally turned to see Harry and Draco finally walking into the hall with

their band of Slytherins behind them. The Slytherin duo looked around in confusion at the shocked silence of the other students as they made their way over to their table.

Harry managed to look up and meet Hermione's gaze from the hall, raising his eyebrow in question. Hermione held back a laugh and shook her head, turning back to her friends again as the busy bustle of chatters started up once more around her.

"What the bloody hell happened here?" Harry asked, smirking as he sat down his usual seat beside Draco, looking at Pansy and Lila on the floor in keen interest.

"Yeah, what did we miss?" Draco pressed, helping himself to some lunch just as Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and some of the other guys sat down around them.

"A lot... Potter's sister here just broke Perrine's nose. Look..." A Slytherin sixth year girl piped up, gesturing to Lila, who was now glaring at her in warning.

Harry couldn't prevent a wry smile from breaking out into his handsome face. "*AJ* did *that*?" He asked incredulously, collapsing into a fit of hysterical laughter that earned a couple of glances from the *Durmstrang* students.

"Never knew that ugly little brat had it in her...Looks like you two are more alike than we thought...eh, Potter?" Draco taunted, smirking when Harry gave him an annoyed glare in response.

"Let's see how *you* like her that way..." He muttered, causing the blonde to blush an interesting shade of scarlet just as the other Slytherins around them fell into a round of laughter again.

Harry bit back a loud yawn as he trailed his misty green eyes over to Prof. McGonagall again, barely being able to follow on with her lecture as he glanced around the classroom once more.

AJ, as usual, was hurriedly taking down every single detail Prof. McGonagall was saying, causing Harry to smirk at the well-missed sight as she did. Turning away from her, he looked up just in time to

see Draco supply Prof. McGonagall the correct answer, earning them another 5 points for their house.

“Very good, Mr. Malfoy. Now, before I dismiss you all, I would like for you to take down your homework for next week. Absolutely *no* late submissions will be accepted.” She dictated, now turning around to begin scribbling something on the blackboard in front.

Harry fought the urge of yawn again and forced himself to sit up, lazily taking out a quill and parchment and setting it firmly on his desk. He had no intention of taking down the assignment though...*no*...of course not. He would probably just copy it from Draco later. After all, what were best friends for?

He smirked and began fussing with his Quill, pretending to be preoccupied with writing down the assignment while he let his mind travel over to Hermione, the brunette bringing a warm fuzzy feeling inside his gut.

He knew he was probably being absurd...If a couple of months back, someone would have told him that he'd be happily whipped by Hermione Granger and he'd be daydreaming about her during class, he would have laughed in that person's face.

Now though, it seemed almost too good to be true. He couldn't wait to see her again...Okay, he knew that was extremely uncharacteristic of him but he couldn't help it... *Usually, I'm the one who dreads of seeing my girlfriends again but now...how annoyingly ironic...* He thought, absentmindedly doodling on a scrap of parchment.

In front of him, he was vaguely aware that AJ had asked Prof. McGonagall a question about the lesson but he didn't seem to care, too busy falling into deep thoughts of his own. As expected, he couldn't help but be a little nervous about the next damn upcoming event ahead...

*The third task...* Harry thought resentfully, fighting down a snort of derision. It seemed that ever since he had gotten out of the bloody hospital wing, the people around him had been talking of nothing else of the said event and doing nothing to calm his rising nerves. Hell, he didn't even have the faintest idea what the third task was going to be

except that Prof. Snape had told him that it would require him to finally utilize his spell-knowledge and skills.

Knowing this, he gathered up some of the well-trusted Slytherin guys he knew and had them help him in training for some spell dueling and defense, the boys out in the private grounds behind the Quidditch field by morning until night...except of course during classes...

Surprisingly, Prof. Snape had offered to help him with some advanced techniques and spells he knew that might be helpful in the tournament, which Harry—and all his friends in fact—had accepted eagerly. So far, the group had been focusing on offense spells this past week...they would be starting on defense spells the following one. He only hoped all this extra training would eventually aid him in the end...He hated to think it would prove entirely useless since he could have spent his days with Hermione instead.

He blushed, shaking the thought away. Okay, the sounded *completely* out of character but he couldn't help it. The girl made him feel so special it was hard not to think of her all the damn time. *Merlin, look at me...I'm thinking about her again. Stop it!* He scolded himself, banishing the thoughts away once more.

So far, he was thankful that Hermione didn't seem to mind the idea of him training with his friends and for that, he was thankful for. He had, however, accepted her proposal to let *her* train him once as well and he had been more than happy to accept, giving her a teasing smile in return.

AJ didn't seem to be minding the idea as well as the girl seemed more focused on improving her grades more than anything—and that involved the obvious make-out sessions Harry knew Draco was persistently trying to get her into.

He smirked at the idea, highly amused and highly disgusted at the same time. He'd probably never get used to *or* like the idea of his best friend dating his twin sister...the very thought just seemed, to him, incredibly...*wrong!* He didn't even want to imagine the possibility...



Sirius, however, had been telling Harry through his now *regular* letters that he was strangely apprehensive about the idea of him training with Prof. Snape though Harry knew the reason behind that. Sirius, he pretty much knew by now, was probably never going to trust Snape. It was just another law of nature he had to live by.

"I want this finished and properly handed in by Tuesday next week. Okay, you may go. *Except...You, Mr. Potter.*" Prof. McGonagall spoke up, breaking through Harry's thoughts as he suddenly stiffened in anticipation, almost certain he was going to get berated about not paying attention in class.

Harry just smirked it off and got up from his seat, nodding for Draco to head on without him as he made his way over to Prof. McGonagall's desk in the front of the room. Draco nodded back and walked off with the other Slytherins, his loud voice echoing through the hall as they passed.

"Oh and while I'm at it, Ms. Potter, why don't you stay as well. I believe you may serve your well-earned detention now." The professor added, giving AJ a withering, disapproving glare.

AJ stopped and gave the older woman a sheepish smile, nodding awkwardly as she sat back down her desk and folded her hands on her lap in anxiety. Harry shot her an impish grin, causing her to glare back at him in warning.

"Well, Mr. Potter, this won't take long. I've just been informed by Prof. Snape that you and all the other champions are needed down at the Quidditch field right away. I believe Mr. Bagman is there to tell you about the upcoming third task." She told him curtly, not even bothering to look up from the piece of parchment she was currently writing on.

Harry nodded silently, making to walk on out of the room when he stopped and turned back around to look at the Transfiguration teacher again, an amused smile on his handsome face. *It's now or never...* He thought, mustering up the courage to ask the question that had been plaguing his mind for a long time now.

"You don't like me very much, do you Professor?" He asked lightly, causing both Prof. McGonagall *and* his twin sister to look up and give him a bewildered look of surprise.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Potter?"

Harry's smirk widened as he shrugged, giving the Professor an amused look. "Don't think I haven't noticed. I can see the way you look at me with nothing but utter resentment. Did it have something to do with my parents?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.

Prof. McGonagall gave him a cool glare before promptly turning back to her writing, giving a long moment of silence before answering. "Well let me tell you, Mr. Potter...I knew of both your mother *and* your father very well. Knew well enough of *both* of them to say that you are more like your mother in nearly every aspect..." She started, pausing to dip her Quill into her bottle of ink before continuing.

"There's only but *one* thing you didn't inherit from either of them, Mr. Potter...And that is..." She looked up at him with a sharp look.

"Your *blunt* rudeness and reckless, *disrespectful* behavior towards those around you... Oh both Lily and James had their immense share of mischief and arrogance over the years but they never...*never* had the pure malice, *rude* and insufferable personality you have. They were head boy and head girl if anything...*Unlike* you..." She said, shaking her head in dislike.

Harry felt his cheeks flame up in insult but he bit his tongue, knowing full well enough not to speak in the situation.

"They, *Mr. Potter*, along with your sister, had *class* and *refinement*. And frankly, I'm not so sure I support the idea of someone like you dating someone like Ms. Granger, whom so happens to be not only the top student of the year but also the most charming, well-refined young lady I have ever seen." She finished, finally looking up from her work to look grimly at him.

Harry could only look back, his cheeks flushed with humiliation but his eyes blazing with rage. "*However...*Who am I to interfere with a student's life? I just hope you do not plan to influence Ms. Granger

with your filthy habits. I must say the biggest disappointment I have of you is how much you didn't measure up to your parents..." She added, looking away from him carelessly.

Harry blinked rapidly in surprise at the harsh words, feeling as though every thing the woman had said had pierced right through his gut like a knife. *I'm not like my parents...I don't measure up to them...I'm nothing but a weak, pathetic excuse of a person...* He thought, biting his lip as he sought to hide his face from the teacher.

He couldn't help but feel stung by Prof. McGonagall's words...They had hit him exactly where it had hurt the most—his pride...His pride and his parents...Hell, his parents *were* his pride...And the idea of not being able to compare with them at all was painful...

Fine...If that was what she thought of him...Let her do so... He suddenly found himself anticipating the third task much more positively after that...He'd show her...He'd show *them*...All of them... He was still worthy of being called a *Potter*...

"I see...Well in that case, I'll be leaving now, Professor. Thank you." He said curtly, his voice flat and cold as he stalked out of the classroom, leaving AJ staring after him in sadness and understanding.

AJ didn't say anything first, merely staring at the spot where Harry had been standing before turning to glare very hatefully at their Transfiguration professor, her green eyes glinting in resentment for the first time at one of her favorite teachers in Hogwarts.

Prof. McGonagall didn't seem to look so pleased with what she said now as she sighed and rubbed her temples, shaking her head. "Perhaps I was a little harsh with the boy...Forgive me, Ms. Potter... I guess him not paying attention in my class really got to me..." She said, shutting her eyes in thought.

Again, AJ refused to answer, only standing up and walking over to her, keeping her face cold and sneering in turn. "What am I to do, Professor?" She asked almost sarcastically, a thick trace of bitterness obviously dripping from her voice.

The teacher sighed again and gestured to the bottles scattered around the room, not bothering to look at the hatred on the younger girl's face. "Just start cleaning up the sample specimens, Ms. Potter." She answered, nodding in turn.

AJ just sneered again and stalked away, trying her best to keep herself from lashing out at the Professor by biting her tongue. *I guess it's true what other people say about how quickly your perception of a person can change by a mere simple action...* She thought sullenly, cursing under her breath in disgust.

"Who does that useless old woman think she is?" Harry muttered sullenly under his breath as he made his way down the entrance hall with a grim expression on his face. He hadn't even responded when Cedric had politely greeted him as he came down from the Hufflepuff common room, doing nothing but a rude scoff in return.

"SO...What do you think this is all about?" Cedric asked again, trying to strike up a friendly or at least...*civil* conversation with the Slytherin as they silently made their way down to the Quidditch field in tense anticipation and awkwardness.

Once again, Harry remained silent as stone, giving the boy a look which indicated how annoyed he was before he turned back to the scene in front of them, pointedly ignoring Cedric altogether.

Undaunted, Cedric shrugged and gestured to Fleur, who was now making her way over to the Quidditch field as well from their Beauxbatons ship, Viktor Krum trailing grudgingly behind her.

"Fleur keeps telling me something about having to go through underground tunnels but I can't be sure...Something about finding treasure or...whatever it was...I reckon this is the hardest task yet. I can't wait." He said, managing a friendly grin as they finally joined Krum and Fleur by the Quidditch field.

"To lose?" Harry supplied derisively for him, turning now to give Cedric an arrogant smirk but Cedric wasn't listening anymore, his eyes focusing intently in shock at the scene in front of him.

“Oh Merlin...What have they done to it?” He asked, his voice cracking as he eyed what used to be their Quidditch field in utter horror. Curious, Harry turned around and managed to blink at it as well, his jaw hanging open in shock.

Their once smoothly trimmed field was no longer flat as it had used to be but instead, it looked as though someone had begun building long low walls all over it which turned and met each other in every direction imaginable.

“Hedges??” Harry wondered out loud curiously, walking over to examine one in interest. Behind him, he could see the other champions doing about the same thing...Except for Krum who was pointedly standing exactly where he was, aiming a dark glare on Harry’s back.

Harry lifted the corner of his lips into a slow, sly smirk as he felt Krum’s raging eyes burning onto him from behind. Biting back a loud insult, he slowly turned around until he was meeting the other boy eye-to-eye, more than willing to keep his gaze steady until the other boy looked away from him first.

Krum didn’t appear as though he was about to give up to him as well but after a long, awkwardly tense moment, he finally blinked and turned away from the Slytherin, his eyes burning bright with intense anger and resentment.

Harry chuckled under his breath and looked away as well, a self-satisfied grin on his face. “Always had no respects for sore losers... Both in the tournament *and* when it comes to women...” He murmured, intentionally saying it out loud for the other boy to hear him.

Krum’s eyes flashed angrily as he whirled back to face him, his mouth immediately setting itself into a growl. “Vat did you say? You vant to say dat to my face, Potter? I vill not take dis from a jerk like you!” He hissed dangerously, walking up to the dark-haired Slytherin and shoving him from behind.

Both Cedric and Fleur gasped in shock and watched on in silent anxiety as Harry calmly sought to regain his balance before turning

back *very* slowly to face Krum again. To their surprise, the boy gave a sweet smile. "Touch me again, Krum and you'll be out of the Quidditch matches all season..." He drawled in a scarily relaxed tone, causing Krum to narrow his eyes in malice.

The Bulgarian just laughed harshly and shoved Harry again, this time causing the slightly smaller boy to nearly collapse against one of the hedges behind him. "Why you—" Harry's eyes were glowing eerily green with utter hatred now.

"You want to take *me* on, Krum? Huh? Me and you, none of your disgustingly *low* friends around to help you this time...Just me and you, one on one...Let's see if you're as tough as they say you are...*without* your fan club to help you." Harry mocked, gingerly picking a leaf from his clean robes.

"I'd take you on, any day Potter. I'm not afraid of you. I'd beat you to a pulp after the horrible plot you had against *Hermy—Hermione*... I won't let you hurt her like that!" Krum spat out, stepping forward and shoving Harry again in challenge.

"Both of you, will you quit it already? You might get caught and we don't want any disqualifications *now*." Cedric tried to ease his way in between the two boys but they shoved him away, not taking their eyes off each other.

Harry shoved Krum back in retaliation, his cold green eyes glinting in pent-up violence. "Look, haven't you been listening to what I said that day? I *love* Hermione, you stupid bastard! I won't let you try to take her from me again! I've worked too hard to keep her already!" He blurted out, immediately regretting his words a moment later.

Krum looked as though he was about to reject but he blinked and looked at Harry again, his thick eyebrows raised in surprise. "You *love* her, Potter? Ver you really serious ven you said all dat? I thought it vas just anuzzer scheme to get her pity again...I—"

Harry looked as though he wanted to explode. "Scheme? *Scheme?*!Krum, goddammit, I *love* her. That's why I'm not about to let you weasel in on her again..." He threatened darkly before lunging

for the Bulgarian boy only to be held back by someone else behind him.

Blinking in surprise, Harry turned just in time to see Ludo Bagman grinning down at him, raising an eyebrow expectantly at all the other champions. "Well, now...Getting yourself acquainted with each other, I see...I'm glad to see you and Mr. Krum here have finally settled your differences, Mr. Potter." He said chirpily, causing Harry to shoot Krum a contemptuous sneer at the thought.

"Oh yes, Mr. Bagman...Don't worry about it, we've settled more than enough of our differences." Harry drawled sarcastically, hiding a loud round of laughter at the disbelieving looks on Cedric and Fleur's faces.

Krum could only glare back in response, his face setting back into that famous scowl. "For once, we agree, Potter..." He muttered under his breath, shaking his head in utter dismay.

Harry only snorted in response, turning away just as Bagman escorted them back over to where Cedric and Fleur were standing, gesturing to the field in front of them with an excited grin on his boyish face.

"What do you guys think? I reckon give them about one more month and they'll be as high as twenty feet. Trust Hagrid to get the job done, eh?" He kidded cheerfully, nudging Harry and Cedric beside him.

Cedric managed a polite smile while Harry merely grunted in response, moving away from the man's annoying elbows. Bagman must have noticed the look on his face but mistook it for something else, reaching over and clamping a firm hand on Harry's lean shoulder.

"Ah, don't you worry about your Quidditch field, Harry. I promise, we'll have your battleground back once the task is over. Now, anyway...Can any of you guess what exactly we're making here?" He asked, now turning to the others while Harry pried himself away from him.

No one spoke for a moment, merely staring at the older wizard in silence before—

“Maze.” Krum muttered surly, earning himself a sardonic smile from Harry. “Wow...Thanks Mr. Genius, we never would have figured that out on our own without the help of your amazing brain cells.” He taunted again, his famous smirk in place.

“Queet it you two... Meester Bagman, we seemly ‘ave to get through ze maze?” Fleur interrupted, turning to the man in front of her in question.

The wizard nodded eagerly, clapping his hands together. “There will be obstacles of course. Think of them as tests...Tests to test the limits of your wizarding abilities. Now, I’ve talked to Hagrid already and he has informed me that he will be providing a number of creatures for the task. There will also be spells you will need to break—you know, that sort of thing.” He explained, stroking his chin.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the idea while the other three nodded in response, urging the man to continue. Bagman turned and gave both Cedric and Harry a proud grin, nodding at the two of them briefly.

“The two champions who are tied at first place are to have a head start into the maze. After that, Mr. Krum here shall enter and then, Ms. Delacour. Oh and before any of you go off about fairness, I assure you that all of you have an equal chance in this task, depending on how you pass the obstacles. Sounds exciting enough, would you say?” He perked again, his eyes brightening in obvious anticipation.

*Knowing the kind of creatures Hagrid breeds... I would have to say this is going be much more fun than I can handle...* Harry thought sarcastically but he bit his tongue, not wanting to show any of his worries in front of the other older champions.

Bagman clapped his hands together again before he turned and gave them a bright smile. “Well okay then! If any of you don’t have any questions, let’s head on up to the castle, shall we? It’s getting rather cold out here.”



The other three nodded while Harry followed after them, biting back a harsh insult when he saw Bagman hurrying up beside him. Just as he thought the man was going to try and offer him some help again, he felt a firm tap on his shoulder, causing him to look up and immediately break out into a cold sneer.

“What do you want...*Krum?*” He hissed softly although he made it quite clear to the other boy just how dangerous he was by clamping his fingers tightly around the wand he now held in his fist.

“Potter, I don’t vant to fight vith you...*again*. I vos only vondering if I could haff a vord.” He said calmly, turning to stare pointedly at Bagman behind them.

The older wizard looked a little bit worried as he eyed the two champions warily, knowing full well the past animosity between the two. “I’m not so sure I’m comfortable leaving the two of you alone like this... Harry, are you sure you don’t want me to wait for you?” He asked uncertainly.

Harry didn’t answer for a long moment, keeping his intense emerald green eyes on Krum before he slowly narrowed them into slits, his lips going into a cold smile. “No, Mr. Bagman...You go on ahead. I believe I can find my way back to the castle on my own.” He drawled slowly, his gaze never wavering from the Bulgarian boy in front of him.

Bagman nodded and began making his way back to the castle through the growing maze before finally disappearing into the castle. As soon as he had gone, Krum finally broke the still silence between them by blinking and taking one step backward.

“Vill you valk vith me?” Krum asked evenly, watching as the raven-haired boy slowly nodded but kept his muscles tensed and ready for any attack that might be directed at him as he did.

The two walked on in steady, challenging silence away from the stadium, both champions keeping a fair amount of distance between them and just as Harry thought Krum was leading him off to the Durmstrang ship, he blinked as Krum headed straight for the forest.

“Why the hell are we here, Krum? You want to tell me what exactly this is all about?” Harry asked coldly as they passed by Hagrid’s cabin and the softly lit Beauxbatons carriage.

He didn’t get an answer as Krum finally stopped when they had reached a quiet stretch of ground near the Beauxbatons horses’ paddock, immediately turning around to face a tense, suspiciously glaring Harry.

“I don’t want to be heard.” He responded coolly, eyeing Harry’s tense form with amused eyes.

“You don’t have to be so tense with me, Potter. It’s not like I set up people around us to help me ambush you any minute, now did I?” He said sarcastically, giving Harry a mocking smile.

Harry’s tightened his grip on his wand further, his eyes flashing angrily like the lightning bolt on his forehead. “No...Of course, you wouldn’t...Krum... You’re not the type of guy who would try the same thing twice, now are you?” He hissed back dangerously, immediately causing the other boy to flush in embarrassment.

“Potter...I have been meaning to talk with you about that as well... See, even though I hate you in the way that I have never hated anyone before... Well... I would like to apologize about what had happened that day... Despite the jerk you are...You did not deserve being ambushed like that...” He started, causing Harry to blink in surprise.

Personally, this had been the first time he had heard the other boy talk so much in a single breath before and he found it quite unexpected. It seems the bastard wasn’t all brawns after all.

“It was all Parvati’s idea... I swear... I myself did not agree to it at first but I guess...The temptation to beat you to a pulp was too hard to resist. You have after all, been nothing more than a rude jerk to me.” He pointed out, causing Harry to smirk and let out a soft round of amused laughter.

“Well, I must say that I am terribly ashamed and dishonored by what I have done to you so...I am sorry. There, I said it. Don’t you ever

expect to hear it again.” He said coldly, eyeing Harry with a steady gaze.

Harry merely raised an eyebrow but nodded, the fingers he had around his wand slowly unclasping as the other boy carried on. “Ve, meaning me and my schoolmates, do not mean to trouble any of you here in Hogvarts. Most of them had wanted to be friends vith you all, particularly you Slytherins so in behalf of them as vell, I vould also like to extend my apologies. Ve all hope to put the past behind us.” He added, shaking his head.

“You just *had* to go and take orders from a crazy bitch like Patil, now did you?” Harry retorted rudely, causing Krum to clench his jaw in annoyance but nevertheless, he didn’t take up the implied challenge.

“I now know vhy I did... You see, as you probably may have noticed already. I haff been genuinely interested with Hermy—Hermi—Hermy-own—”

“*Hermione.*” Harry supplied irritably, now crossing his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow for the other boy to continue.

“Yes, *Hermione.* I haff truly liked her and vell...I guess it just...how you say...*pissed* me off that you vould even consider doing such a thing to her... She is the sveetest, most sincere and most admirable girl I haff ever met and the mere idea of you playing here like that...vell...it angered me a lot. To say the least...” He explained, glaring at him.

If anything, Harry’s eyebrow only rose higher, his face remaining the same cold mask as before. “Your point is?”

“Vell it got me thinking... If a jerk like you vould be stupid enough not to take care of a good voman... I vould have made her happier. So vat I’m trying to say here is... the reason I came to apologize to you was because I attacked you based mainly on my jealousy. It just angered me greatly that she vould choose a bastard like you vhen I vas offering everything to her. I vould never haff hurt her the vay you did.” He added darkly, clenching his fists.

Harry stiffened as well as he looked away sharply, a growl forming on his face. "I know this all already. Why did you have to tell me this? Is that all you wanted to say?" He snapped, turning back to glare at him.

Krum, however, shook his head and looked away as well, shoving his hands into his robes. "I vant to tell you vat it is I realized just a few minutes ago before Mr. Bagman arrived." He said softly, a grim smirk on his face.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Which is?"

Krum finally looked up and managed to lock gazes with him, their eyes showing not only the exact the amount of resentment they had for each other but also the obvious respect as well, though both did not want to admit that.

"She must love you very much then, Potter. And I can see that...after everything you haff done...despite the asshole you truly are... And after everything you haff inflicted upon her... You love her too. And for that, I vill back off." He said in resignation, looking away again.

Harry's eyes widened in surprise, freezing for a whole minute before he managed to find his voice to speak. He couldn't even believe that he was having this conversation with this guy! His rival was actually backing off that easily... *What brought this on exactly?* He thought, hiding a smirk.

"But..."

*And here comes the punch line.* Harry thought again, shaking his head at his own belief at the fool's convincing act. He knew Krum giving up that easily was too good and too *amusing* to be true.

Krum's eyes were glinting this time as he eyed the dark-haired Slytherin, walking one step forward until they were dangerously face-to-face. "I sveal, by the name of Merlin, Potter...If you ever...ever hurt her again, I vill have to take back everything I just said, castrate your poor excuse of a crotch and pound you into the next century." He growled, causing Harry to blink in surprise again.

It took a whole minute for him to recover again as he laughed and shoved the other boy away, looking highly amused. "Now *that's* the Viktor Krum I know. Although I hate to agree with what you just said, *Vicky*, I have to accept that challenge so... I swear by my word *and* my crotch that I will never hurt Hermione again." He said, surprisingly causing the Bulgarian boy to break out into an amused laugh.

"I'm seriously hoping you aren't serious about the crotch part, though." Harry said, looking visibly terrified by the idea. Krum only smirked and didn't say anything else to affirm or deny the concept, looking away once more.

"You know Potter, when you're not being a conniving, self-centered asshole, you're pretty much alright." He managed, nodding at him. Harry chuckled idly, returning the gesture. "Why thank you, Krummy-boy...The same to you." He said sarcastically, backing away.

"I still hate you though." Krum muttered, causing the Slytherin to laugh out loud for real this time. "And I, *you*, Krummy-boy. I'm glad we're getting along so well after this little conversation. Seems we've had a lot in common after all." Harry drawled again, this time grinning at the response.

Krum scowled, giving him an annoyed look. "Potter, I have one thing to ask of you. Just *one*." He said, his eyes narrowing. "And what would that be, oh mighty Durmstrang champion?" Harry asked wryly, smirking.

"For the bloody love of hell, would you quit with the overly creative and *annoying* nick names?!" He snapped, his eyes flashing in anger as Harry held back another round of mocking laughter.

"As you wish, *maestro*." Harry retorted, making to lean against a tree behind him while he sniggered softly.

Krum looked as though he was about to say something again but he stopped and shrugged, turning back to give him a respectful nod. "The other thing I wanted to tell you *vos* that...I wanted to say congratulations. You fly very vell. I *vos* vatching your first task. I hate to admit it but you deserve your position in first place now." He said, rolling his eyes.

Harry grinned in response. "I know. And I'm glad to know you've finally realized this, champion. Oh but don't worry, I thought your little *Wronski Feint* was a pretty *cute* maneuver anyway. Really amusing." He said rudely, sniggering again.

Krum looked as though he was about to snap something at him when something suddenly rustled behind him, causing Harry to stop instantly and grab Krum's arm to pull him away.

"Vot is it? Vot are you playing with now, Potter?" He asked, glaring suspiciously at him but Harry shook his head, silently glaring at him to keep him silent as he listened carefully to the sound.

"Look, if this is another one of your schemes to try and scare me, Potter, you've got another thing coming. I—"

"Look champion, will you shut up for a minute? I heard something!" Harry hissed angrily at him, his arm tightening around the other boy as his eyes roamed piercingly around their dark surroundings.

Slowly, he began reaching for his wand again, feeling the smooth wood as he carefully began tightening his fingers around it once more. Setting his mouth into a firm growl, he finally stepped forward with his wand held out.

"Whoever you are...Come out right now. I've heard you...You can't hide from me... Come out so I can see your face." He spoke steadily, keeping his wand stretched out in front of him as he heard another rustle again.

"Come out so we can see you, you coward!" Harry hissed again, this time shoving Krum roughly behind him. Krum made to protest but stopped and gasped as soon as they had seen the figure of a man stagger out from behind a large Oak tree in front of them.

Harry squinted at him in confusion, not being to recognize him for a long moment before realization finally dawned upon him and his eyes widened—both in immense shock and utter loathing.

"Mr. Crouch?" Krum asked in utter bewilderment behind him, his thick bushy eyebrows coming together to meet on his forehead.

Harry couldn't really blame him...Any person would have had a hard time distinguishing the one prim and proper gentleman Mr. Crouch was from this immensely grungy and blood-speckled person. The scene was just as ludicrous as Draco's hair sticking up all over the place.

First thing Harry had noticed was that the knees of his robes were both ripped and bloody and his exhausted, unshaven face was scratched and bruised all around. He looked both gray and weary as he struggled to keep himself upright, his formerly neat hair and mustache badly in need of a trim. The man looked as though he had been traveling for days now...

*And that's odd considering that he's supposed to be home sick according to Percy Weasley...* He thought, his eyes glinting in curious suspicion.

The strangest thing about him though was probably the manner in which the old man was behaving himself. He appeared to be talking rapidly and gesturing wildly with his hands as though he were talking to some person that both Harry and Krum simply could *not* see at all. The man was conversing with air for Merlin's sake... Something was definitely wrong here...*And I intend to find out just what is...* Harry thought grimly as he stepped forward, keeping his eyes trained on the man in front of them.

"He's vos one of the judges of the tournament, vosn't he? Vat is wrong vith him?" Krum asked out of nowhere, causing Harry to flinch in surprise but the Slytherin nodded, walking closer to Crouch until he was near enough to hear what the man was saying.

"....And when you've finished with those tasks, Weatherby, I'd like for you to owl Dumbledore about the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament. Karkaroff has informed me that there will be around twelve." He ranted, looking completely out of his mind.

*Weatherby?? Send owls?? Could he mean 'Weasley'? As in, 'Percy Weasley'?* Harry thought curiously, remembering Percy's words about him being Crouch's personal assistant.

“Er...Mr. Crouch?” He asked slowly, unsure of what he was supposed to do despite his obvious hatred for the man. He still couldn’t be sure if it was indeed Mr. Crouch who had attacked his sister but it was best to keep his guard up in case anything happened.

“....Oh and before I forget, send an owl to Madame Maxime as well...Ask her how many students she’ll be bringing now that Karkaroff will be bringing a dozen. Do that for me, Mr. Weatherby will you? Will you? Will—”

The man stopped as his eyes started bulging almost ridiculously, his form stiffening as he stood there muttering soundlessly to the tree...Or... ‘*Weatherby*’... Harry thought, fighting the urge to laugh despite the situation.

“Vat is wrong? Vats the matter vith him, Potter?” Krum demanded, walking closer to them. “How the fuck should I know, Krum? It’s not like I would know these damn things!” Harry snapped back, glaring at him.

“Mr. Crouch? Mr. Crouch, are you alright?” Harry asked again, this time braving another step towards him. He stopped when he saw the man’s eyes rolling in his head, causing him to stiffen in nervousness.

Frowning, he turned to look at Krum, who was now looking incredibly disturbed at what he was seeing. “Listen, Krum, I never thought I’d ever say this but I need your help with this...I need you to go back to the castle and get someone—”

“*Dumbledore!*” Harry jumped in surprise when Crouch had lunged forward at him and grabbed a handful of his robes, yanking the Slytherin closer to him though his eyes were currently staring over Harry’s head in utter blankness.

Harry recoiled and tried to move away but the man held on tighter, drawing the younger wizard closer to him in what seemed like utter desperation. “I...need...see...*Dumbledore...*” He managed to say, his eyes rolling back again.



Harry winced, trying to wrestle himself away from the other wizard. "Okay, if you let go of me and get up, Mr. Crouch, I'll take you to Dumbledore." He said, moving away.

"I've done...stupid...thing..." Crouch breathed out, looking completely insane as his eyes began rolling and bulging again, a trickle of spittle now running down his chin. It almost seemed like he was having a hell of a hard time getting a single word out. "Must...tell...Dumbledore..."

Harry tried not to wince in disgust again as he nodded, trying to send out some sort of signal to Krum through his eyes. "Get up then, Mr. Crouch. I'll take you to see him." He said again, this time louder and clearer in case the crackpot couldn't understand him.

To his relief, Crouch's eyes slowly traveled over to finally rest on him, the man's face looking totally blank and emotionless. "Who...you?" He asked, breathing the words out.

This time, Harry's eyebrow rose in confusion, giving the man a skeptical look. "I'm Harry Potter, Mr. Crouch... I believe we've seen each other before. I'm a student here at Hogwarts." He explained carefully, looking at Krum for help again but to his annoyance, the other boy was holding back in obvious fear.

"You're not...his?" Crouch asked again, his mouth now sagging as he spoke. Harry barely kept himself from moving away again but he shook his head to answer him, not having the faintest idea what the man was talking about.

"No." He replied, now looking up and glaring menacingly at Krum as he answered. He stiffened when Crouch began pulling him closer, yanking on his robes as he did. Harry tried to move away but Crouch had already kept a firm grip on him, successfully pulling him nearer. "Dumbledore's?" He asked again.

"Yes. That's right...Mr. Crouch, would you mind letting go of my robes?" Harry asked, his eyebrows fused together.

"Warn...Dumbledore..."

“Mr. Crouch, I’ll go get him if only you would *let go of me*.” Harry answered evenly, now feeling his irritation rising up at the man’s stubborn grip on him.

“...Thank you, Weatherby. Oh and when you have done that, could you make me a cup of tea? My wife should be arriving anytime soon and we shall be attending a concert with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge.”

Harry sighed with relief as Crouch finally let go of him and began talking animatedly with the tree again, looking completely unaware of Harry or Krum’s presence with him once again.

“Oh yes, my son has gained about 12 O.W.L.s...Very promising indeed, very promising. Thank you, I’m quite proud of him too. Anyway, please bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I’d like to make a response.” He continued just as Harry backed away from him.

“Turning to Krum, he gave the Bulgarian boy a glare. “You stay here and watch him. I’ll go get Dumbledore since I know where his office is.” Harry said, making to run off but Krum grabbed his arm in nervousness.

“Are you mad? The man is completely insane! You’re leaving me alone with him, Potter?” He asked, letting Harry go just as Crouch grabbed at him again.

“No...Don’t...Leave...Me!” He whispered, his eyes bulging out again. “I...escaped...must warn...must tell...see Dumbledore...my fault...all my fault... Bertha...dead...my fault...my son...my fault...tell Dumbledore...Harry Potter...Dark Lord...stronger...Harry Potter...” He mumbled out, spittle continuously running down his chin.

“I’ll go get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch! Krum, dammit, would you fucking *help?*!” Harry exploded in utter panic at the man’s words, whipping around to give the boy one of his fiercest glares.

Reluctantly, Krum finally moved forward squatted down next to Crouch, eyeing the man in anticipation. “Hurry back, vill you?” He asked as Harry finally ran as fast as he could back up to the castle, his footsteps hard and heavy along the stone grounds.

Grimacing, he urged his legs faster up the marble staircase inside the castle towards the second floor, shoving past many other students as he passed. About 3 minutes later, he finally stopped in front of the gargoyle statue he recognized as the entrance to Dumbledore's office he had seen once before two years ago.

"Sherbet lemon!" He shouted out breathlessly, panting as he waited for the gargoyle to spring to life and open. No such luck.

"Come on, you fucking piece of crap! Move, dammit!" He cursed out loud, feeling stupidly foolish as he stood there waiting for the statue to do what he had just shouted at him.

"Ah screw this..." Harry muttered, raising his wand and pointing it at the statue in impatience. He was just about to mutter the first spell that came into his mind when a he heard a loud voice call out behind him, causing him to whirl around instantly.

"POTTER! What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?! You want to get suspended?!"

Harry whirled around just in time to see Prof. Snape walking up to him, obviously heading to Prof. Dumbledore's office as well as he had several stacks of papers in his hands. As soon as he saw the panicked look in Harry's face however, he stopped and looked at him in question.

"What are you doing here, Potter? Shouldn't you be off in the common room by now?" He asked, stopping right in front of him.

"Professor! I have to see the headmaster right away! Mr. Crouch, he's turned up somehow in the forest and he's asking to see—"

"Mr. Potter, have you been drinking again?! What are you talking about?!" Snape interrupted, raising an eyebrow at him.

"*Professor!* Mr. Crouch! From the ministry! He's completely out of his mind! He's in the forest and he wants to see Dumbledore right away!" Harry shouted again, his eyes flashing in panic.

“Harry, the headmaster is busy at the moment. Now calm yourself and explain to me, is this really important?” Prof. Snape asked calmly, his eyes piercing right through Harry’s wide ones.

Harry glared back at him in frustration. “*Bloody hell*, Professor! Look, Mr. Crouch isn’t right! I tell you, he’s lost his mind! He keeps saying something about warning Dumbledore about the Dark Lord and—”

“Is there a problem here, Severus?” He asked, a curiously confused expression on his elderly face as he peered at them.

“Professor Dumbledore! Mr. Crouch is here! He’s down in the forest completely out of his mind and he wants to talk to you!” Harry rushed out, expecting the headmaster to immediately berate him with questions as well but to his surprise, Dumbledore just nodded.

“Very well then, Mr. Potter. Lead the way.” He said, he and Snape following off after Harry as the Slytherin sought to catch his breath.

“What did Crouch tell you, Harry?” Dumbledore asked grimly as they made their way down the marble staircase. “I’m not sure, headmaster...He keeps talking of warning you about something he’s done...something horrible...He’s also mentioned something about Bertha Jorkins and Voldemort getting stronger...I just don’t know but I reckon it’s important...” Harry breathed out, literally jumping the steps now.

“Indeed...” Was all Dumbledore said before he began walking faster, Snape trailing after him in confused silence.

“He’s acting like he’s not himself... I don’t know what’s wrong with him. He looked as though he didn’t know where he was...He was talking as though Percy Weasley was there before switching again and telling me about warning you. I left him with Viktor Krum when I ran off.” Harry explained as they reached the forest where he had left them.

“Viktor Krum? Did anyone else see you?” Dumbledore suddenly asked sharply, quickening his pace again as Harry and Snape struggled to keep up with him.

"No...Krum and I were talking when we saw Crouch come out of the forest like that...I don't know how he got here." Harry answered, looking worn out as he walked on beside him.

"Harry, are you crazy? Walking off alone into the forest with Viktor Krum? I'm surprised *he* didn't attack you!" Snape suddenly cut in, causing Dumbledore to eye him sharply.

"Severus, I hardly think this is the situation to discuss school rivalries. Now, where are they, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, turning back to Harry just as the Slytherin pointed out the clearing.

Then, he stopped as he passed the Beauxbatons carriage, looking around in utter confusion. There was nobody there. "But...they were here, professor! I swear, they were here when I left them!" Harry blurted out, glancing around in aggravation.

"*Lumos...*" Harry watched as Dumbledore's wand lit up and began illuminating the dark surroundings around them until it finally found a pair of feet on the ground which looked suspiciously like Krum's.

Dumbledore and Snape both rushed forward towards the boy's sprawled figure as Harry made to look around them again but there was no sign of Mr. Crouch anywhere. "He's unconscious..." Snape muttered, carefully inspecting Krum's neck for a pulse.

Dumbledore walked over and inspected Krum's form closer, his half-moon glasses glinting briefly in the night around them. "He is just stunned. Though I don't see Crouch anywhere..." He said softly, looking around them.

Harry immediately rounded on him with flashing green eyes. "Look, I saw Crouch with my own two eyes okay? Don't you think for once second that I was making that all up because I saw him!" He snapped angrily, as he raised a hand and wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand.

Dumbledore sighed, nodding at his words. "I do not think you were lying, Mr. Potter. I believe you...Though I do have suspicions on why Mr. Crouch could have run away like that." He said before turning back to Krum's figure again.

“Shall I go get Madam Pomfrey, headmaster?” Snape asked but Dumbledore shook his head, raising his wand over Krum’s motionless form. “*Ennervate.*”

Krum suddenly opened his eyes, looking completely dazed for a second before his eyes finally focused on Dumbledore, causing him to bolt up immediately. Dumbledore however, put a hand on his shoulder, giving the boy a small but reassuring smile.

“He attacked me! The bastard attacked me!” Krum muttered under his breath, using a hand to squeeze his neck in pain. “That crazy madman attacked me...I was just looking around for any sign of Potter when he jumped at me from behind!” He explained, a scowl on his face.

Dumbledore looked as though he was about to respond when huge, thundering footsteps began making their way towards them, causing all four of them to look up and see Hagrid running at them with a crossbow in his hand, Fang at his heels.

“Professor Dumbledore, sir! Harry...What happened here? What—?”

“Hagrid, I need for you to fetch Prof. Karkaroff right away. His student has just been attacked and it is crucial that he is informed immediately. When you’re done, please alert Prof. Moody that—” Dumbledore never got to finish as Moody finally came into sight behind Hagrid.

“No need, Dumbledore. I’m here... I would have gotten here sooner if it wasn’t for this damn leg... What happened?” He asked, peering at all of them in obvious suspicion.

“Yeh, what—”

“Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!” Dumbledore said again, this time in a sharper tone, causing Hagrid to wince sheepishly and nod, disappearing off into the darkness to find the Durmstrang headmaster.

“It is essential right away that we find Barty Crouch. I don’t know where he is right now but according to young Harry here, he is on the

grounds.” Dumbledore told Moody, causing the auror’s eyes to whirl in shock.

“I’m on it, headmaster.” He growled before he set off deeper into the forest with his wand outstretched in front of him.

“No, *I’m* on it.” Prof. Snape added distrustfully as he stood up as well and set off into the forest as well, taking a different direction from Moody.

Dumbledore and Harry both remained in silence after that until they finally heard Hagrid and Fang returning once more, this time Prof. Karkaroff scurrying after them. As soon as he saw Krum on the ground, his eyes widened into saucers.

“What is this, Dumbledore?! What exactly is going on here?!” He demanded, walking over and helping his student up.

“I vos attacked, professor! Mr. Crouch...Or votever his name is—” Krum said, rubbing his head as he sought to keep himself upright.

“Crouch attacked you? *Barty Crouch* attacked you?! The TriWizard judge?!” Karkaroff asked, his voice cracking.

“Igor, please...” Dumbledore tried to begin but Karkaroff was livid now as he glared at Harry and Dumbledore, pointing a finger at them.

“Treachery! That’s what this is all about, treachery! A plot against me! You and your Ministry of Magic have all been planning against me and my champion from the start! First an underage contestant and now an attempt to put my champion out of action! Why your champion *Potter* here must have planned his ambush now did he? He’s always been after Krum from the start! Here’s what I think of *you*, Dumbledore!” Karkaroff spat harshly onto the ground at Dumbledore’s feet but Harry had a feeling that wasn’t such a good idea, considering that a slowly reddening Hagrid was right beside him.

Just as Harry thought, Hagrid seized Karkaroff by the front of his furs and lifted him off the ground, slamming the smaller man into a nearby tree. “Apologize!” He growled as he tightened his fist around a gasping Karkaroff’s neck.

"Hagrid, *no*. Put him down!" Dumbledore said angrily, his eyes flashing in threat. Hagrid growled again but obliged, slowly removing the hand he had around the smaller man's throat, causing Karkaroff to slide back down the tree in weariness until he was huddled on the ground.

"Hagrid, please bring young Harry here back up to the castle. Bring him directly to the Slytherin Common Room and Harry—I want you to stay there. Any other things you have to do can wait until morning, do you understand?" Dumbledore asked sharply, eyeing Harry through his spectacles.

"Yes...Of course, Professor." Harry answered slowly, briefly marveling how Dumbledore had managed to figure out that he had been wanting to send Sirius a letter about what had happened immediately.

"I'll leave Fang here with you, headmaster." Hagrid said, glaring darkly at Karkaroff, who still lay sprawled ungracefully on the ground in front of them with Krum beside him.

"Next time, Viktor... Don't go off wandering anywhere with Potter... It might be the end of you..." Karkaroff said spitefully, managing a weak glare directed at Harry then at Dumbledore before finally settling on Hagrid.

Harry didn't take up the challenge, only sneering at the older man just as Krum shook his head rapidly, looking surprised. "Headmaster, Potter here did not haff anything to do vith it..." He explained but Karkaroff didn't appear to hear him.

Harry didn't know what else happened after that as Hagrid led him back to the castle in silence, the half-giant's huge, hulking form incredibly tense with visible anger. "How dare he...Accusin Dumbledore like that...Like Dumbledore ever wanted any of this ter happen!" Hagrid raged out loud, causing Harry to wince to himself when the large man rounded on him.

"An *you*! What did yeh think yeh was doing walkin off with Viktor Krum of all people?! From what I've been hearin around here, yeh two have quite the rivalry! What were yeh doing with him?! Yeh can't trust him



after what he's done to yeh!" Hagrid said angrily, shaking his head in dismay.

Harry couldn't help but feel irritated at the scolding tone in his voice. "Hey, that's none of your business, Hagrid! We were just talking about Hermione, okay? Leave it alone!" Harry blurted out, causing Hagrid to growl at him again but he kept his silence, keeping an awkward atmosphere all the way down to the Slytherin dungeons.

"Besides, *you* were getting more than friendly with Madame Maxime yourself, Hagrid!" Harry pointed out crossly, causing Hagrid to glare angrily at him again.

"Now don't yeh dare talk ter me about her, Harry! I've got her number now and I've been tryin ter get back in me good books and tryin to get her to tell me what's comin in the third task! Yeh can't trust any of em after all!" Hagrid pointed out as they finally reached the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons.

Harry didn't say anything as he entered the common room and neither did Hagrid as he went back off towards the forest once more, drowning so much in his bad mood that he didn't even bother bidding Harry goodbye.

Harry sighed and finally entered the common room in silence, ignoring the excessively cheerful greetings some of the Slytherin girls gave him when they saw him as he passed by. Then, spotting Draco in the middle of a rowdy group of Slytherin boys, he rudely began shoving past all of them and seized him by the robes, raring to tell him what had happened immediately.

"I don't understand it, Harry... How can Crouch disappear off just like that?" Hermione asked the following night as she gingerly lifted her wand and magically conjured up a warm cozy fire in the marble fireplace in front of her.

Frowning at the silence, she turned and managed a small smile in amusement when she saw Harry pacing the length of the entire Slytherin Pool Room in complete thoughtful silence, his handsome features drawn up into an endearingly concentrated frown. Harry, it seemed, couldn't get the past events out of his mind that whole day.

To be honest, it kind of annoyed her in a way that Harry wasn't paying as much attention to her these days as he always did but she knew it was only because the Slytherin champion was obviously dead nervous about the last task at hand. She could easily see it in his face and it seemed like he was always distracted these days, not even having the correct presence of mind at times to send his usual sneers and jibes at the people around him. It was strangely disturbing.

"Harry? Were you listening to me?" She asked again, this time causing Harry to stop and whirl around to face her, an absent expression on his face as he responded. "I'm fine, Hermione. Leave it." He answered evenly, this time plopping himself down one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace in heavy silence.

Strangely enough, this had been the only time the two had ever gotten the opportunity to spend some time together again and now that they were both here, Harry seemed to be the one completely preoccupied with something else.

Hermione frowned when she remembered their meeting just a couple of minutes ago. Harry hadn't even noted her presence right away and when he did, he only gave her a curt nod and brief kiss before he led her off to their usual place of solitude—the Slytherin Pool House. He had been pacing the room after that, stopping occasionally to bring up over and over again the subject of Mr. Crouch and what he had heard from Dumbledore the night before.

It was extremely unnerving. "Potter, I am seriously getting ticked off here. I blow off a day I could have spent with my friends to just stand here watching you pace, brood and mope to yourself?" Hermione snapped, finally giving in to the anger bubbling inside her.

"What's one bloody boring day with those Gryffindor losers anyway?" Came the rude, insensitive reply, causing Hermione to stiffen in irritation and narrow her brown eyes at him, her hands tightening dangerously into fists.

"Well spending my time with them would have certainly proved better than wasting my time here with my *so-called* boyfriend who won't even acknowledge my very presence! Harry, if you're going to be such a sore about this whole thing, why did you arrange to meet me

here in the first place?" Hermione pointed out tartly, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Oh spare me the attempted guilt trip, Hermione... I swear, your damn Gryffindor tendencies get more annoying every damn time." Harry retorted tiredly, running a hand through his dark hair and tossing the sleek, raven locks slightly as he did.

Hermione's jaw dropped in fury. She couldn't believe he was starting this again! And only after a couple of days from his ambush incident! It seemed that no matter what she did or no matter what happened between them and no matter much they did love each other, there was no removing the insensitive, rude selfish jerk she knew was still inside of Harry. And like it or not, her boyfriend was forever going to have those snappy, moody, *jerk-ish* moments...No matter how sweet he could be.

*I guess some things just can't change...No matter how much you try to make them...* Hermione thought grimly, sighing before she turned and collapsed into an armchair as well, glaring at him.

"Harry, I'm not the one being a jerk here! Now tell me right now, do you want me here or should I go back to my rooms? I believe I still have some studying to do and if we're not going to so much as *talk* at all, then I would much rather *leave*." She snapped at him, her coffee brown eyes glinting.

"Then leave! No one's forcing you to stay here, *Granger!*" He blurted out before he could stop himself, somehow finding it much easier to take out his anger and frustration at the people around him to make it easier for himself as well.

That probably did it. Hermione stood up, her eyes fiercely glowing and began gathering her stuff, keeping her furious gaze on Harry with a surprisingly calm look in her eyes.

"You know Harry...I love you...I love you dearly and I always will." She started; gathering her things into her arms as she finally stopped and gave him one last poisonous glare, which surprisingly, Harry met with his own taunting smirk.

“But I swear to bloody Merlin, Potter, that you can honestly be the biggest, most insensitive *asshole* I have ever met when you want to be!” She pointed out in an angry retort before she hastily began making her way out of the room.

Harry’s smirk faltered instantly as he immediately stood back up and made to go after her but the brown-haired Gryffindor suddenly froze, turning around with an evil smile on her face that made even *Harry’s* eyes widen in nervousness.

“Here! Catch!” She snapped, her wry smile widening as she promptly raised a hand and hurled a large, hardbound book at him, purposely hitting the dark-haired Slytherin right in between the legs where Hermione positively knew it hurt the most.

Just as she expected, Harry’s green eyes immediately widened into pain-filled saucers and an uncharacteristic look of utter disbelief fell upon his handsome features as he doubled over onto the floor at the harshness of the blow.

“*Fuck!* Dammit, Granger!! What the fuck is the matter with you?!” He cursed out loud, his usually low drawling voice uncharacteristically high and shaking, causing Hermione to feel a small surge of satisfaction as she watched Harry’s handsome face begin to redden with pain.

“You had it coming, Potter. Believe me...You had it coming a *long* time ago.” Hermione replied coolly before she stalked off, not giving the Slytherin a chance to explain or redeem himself as he forced himself to scramble up after her.

“Hermione! Wait! Wait, look I didn’t mean what I just said okay? I—Hermione!” Harry watched with blazing emerald green eyes as Hermione shut the door of the entrance to the room loudly, leaving him all alone in the pool room with his throbbing pain and his anger.

“*Damn...*” He muttered under his breath, running a hand through his hair once more before he plopped back down onto the couch, violently hurling the book Hermione had thrown at him at the chair across his own.

*Great...First McGonagall insults my pride...Then I find out the last bloody task is an annoyingly bloody fucking maze... Then I practically get attacked by a bloody crazy Ministry wizard... Following that, I have Sirius berating about it the day after... Of course, followed by failing my exam in fucking Transfiguration...Oh and to top it all off nicely, Hermione is pissed at me.* Again. Harry thought moodily, glaring at the empty chair in front him where Hermione had been sitting.

Then, finally noticing the book he had thrown there, his eyes widened when he had suddenly read the title— *TriWizarding through the Ages*. Genuinely curious now, he reached over and grabbed the book, turning it over so he could read the subtitle— *A Compilation of Effective Spells used by Champions in the 18th Century*. Harry's eyes widened in surprise, immediately feeling overcome by a huge wave of shame.

He suddenly remembered the reason he and Hermione had agreed to meet there that night. Hermione was supposed to have been helping Harry prepare for the 3rd task as well...It seemed she had really wanted to help him from the start...He had just been so darn busy brooding to himself to remember.

*"Damn..."* He cursed again before he immediately dropped the book in his hands and tore after the brunette, ignoring the lingering pain in his pants. *Right after I apologize, I am so going to tell her about hitting me there...* He thought, wincing as he hurriedly slid the entrance open and tore off, his eyes frantically searching the corridors.

After several more minutes of frantic searching, he finally spotted her making her walk calmly down the corridor leading to the Gryffindor Tower, her pace surprisingly slow and relaxed as she walked but Harry didn't have time to dwell on it further.

He tore off and managed to cut in front of her, blocking her path and causing Hermione to stop abruptly and look up at him with an unreadable expression in her brown eyes. "Hermione...I'm...sorry... I'm such a dick... I know... I'm sorry, I..I didn't mean...what I said...back there...I was just...tense...The tournament and

all...Sorry..." Harry managed to breathe out, panting heavily in front of her.

Then, he winced and prepared himself for the worst— Hermione crying, Hermione swearing at him, Hermione slapping him hard on the cheek and pounding on his chest... He could almost feel it coming as he stood there, awaiting her response.

Then, to his surprise, she *laughed*. Hermione just *laughed*. Harry's eyes narrowed immediately as he watched the Gryffindor struggling with her laughter in front of him, her coffee brown eyes twinkling in mirth and amusement.

"And just what the *fuck* is so funny, Granger? Are you actually making a mockery out of me?" Harry spoke softly, his eyes blazing with righteous anger before he turned and stormed back off in silent anger, his form tense and rigid.

Hermione's eyes instantly widened in alarm. "Harry, wait! Come on, hold on you git! Slow down, let me explain!" She said, still laughing as she hurried after him, grabbing his arm tightly in an attempt to stop him.

Harry didn't say anything but stopped, not at all moving but Hermione knew he was listening. "Look, I'm sorry too okay? I don't mean to laugh or anything but see... I was actually *waiting* for you to catch up to me... That was why I was walking so damn slow in the first place." She said, smiling at his narrowed eyes.

"Why?" He hissed, now turning to face her and allowing the Gryffindor to see the angry humiliation blazing in his emerald green orbs. "Do you think you're funny, Granger? Playing me out to be a fool?! You think you're so damn smart and you know so much about me?" He said softly but Hermione knew she had crossed the line this time when she saw that the look in his eyes but of only pure, unadulterated anger now.

"Harry, don't be like that okay? I only did that because I knew it was the only way I could divert your attention somehow... I knew the easiest way to make you break was to leave you to your own contemplative thoughts rather than berate you on anything,..." She

explained again, leaning over to caress his cheek in an affectionate manner.

Harry stiffened in surprise, his narrowed eyes now going comically wide as the words processed through his brain. It took him a whole minute to realize what Hermione had just said before finally, despite himself, he actually let out an amused chuckle.

"I see...Well, you certainly *do* seem to know me now better than I do..." He mused, shaking his head before he finally relaxed and pulled the girl into an embrace, his lean arms going immediately to wrap around her waist.

Hermione smiled and looked up at him, giving him a teasing look. "Well, did it work, *champion*? Do I have your attention now?" She asked softly, leaning over to give the Slytherin a soft kiss on the lips. Harry smirked into the kiss, merely nodding in response.

"You never cease to amaze me, Hermione...That was *bad*... You're a bad little Gryffindor, little girl..." He whispered playfully into her ear before he leaned forward and bit her on the neck, causing her to flinch in surprise.

"Am I?" She managed to murmur, feeling a ripple of desire run through her veins when Harry nodded slowly in response, his hands now moving down her waist in a seductively slow motion before resting on her slender hips, pulling the girl closer to his own warm body.

"Very bad..." He whispered, causing Hermione to shudder in response when she felt his warm breath tickling her neck. She sighed and wound her own arms around his neck, leaning into his strong embrace and enjoying the feel of his wonderfully lean and firm body pressing onto her own.

Harry chuckled his seductive laugh and pulled back to give Hermione a teasing smirk, his green eyes sparkling in amusement. "I don't think so, Hermione." He drawled before he smirked wider and without warning bent down and easily scooped Hermione up into his arms, the girl gasping in surprise at the action.

“Potter, you bloody jerk! Put me down before anyone sees us!” Hermione hissed at him, wrapping her arms tighter around his neck in nervousness as Harry only chuckled again and draped her legs over his arms before walking easily back to the Slytherin Pool Room.

“Not *here*, Granger... Let’s continue this somewhere private...” He said softly, ignoring the rather loud, irritated rants Hermione was shouting at him as he walked.

“Harry!” She hissed again, giving him an indignant glare but Harry only returned it with a smirk yet again, causing Hermione to wish for nothing more than to rip that sexy smirk off his handsome face.

As soon as they had entered the solitude of the Pool Room again, Harry finally obliged by setting Hermione back firmly on her feet. Ignoring her rants about public displays of affection, he turned to seal the room again before looking up to give her a feral grin.

Just as Hermione opened her mouth to say something, however, Harry suddenly raised something in his hand, his grin turning into a softer smile. “What is this for?” He asked, showing Hermione the copy of the book she had borrowed for him in his hands.

Despite herself, she blushed as she answered him. “Oh...Well, I wasn’t so sure about that book... I’ve been searching the library days now to find it. It’s a list of spells the other TriWizard champions in the past have used during their own assigned tasks at that time... I hear that though the tasks are not always the same every time, the spells and skills required to win are. So I figured, there must be some spells here worth learning...I was hoping to help you with some.” She said, giving Harry a shy smile.

Harry couldn’t prevent a small, tender smile from breaking out into his face. “I didn’t know you were that concerned, Granger...” He teased, reaching over to pull Hermione back into his arms.

“Well... To be honest, Harry...I’m scared...I’m afraid of what might happen to you once you enter that maze... And I want you to be safe...I don’t want anything bad to happen...Because I can *feel* it...I can *feel* that something horrible is going to happen to you, Harry...And I’m telling you know, I’m damn scared...” Hermione



whispered shakily, not being able to prevent the tears starting to pool in her eyes.

Harry's arms tightened around her, his fingers going to entangle gently in her hair and caress her softly in an attempt to calm her. "I know, Hermione...We're all scared of what's about to happen...And to tell you the truth, I know the feeling and I'm not going to lie to you—I have a strong gut instinct that something *will* happen... And if it helps, I'm dead scared too. I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to face it prepared enough..." He admitted softly, looking away for a long moment.

Hermione didn't say anything but squeezed his waist in return, burying her face into his chest to hide her tears. "I don't expect you to understand right away but Hermione... I'm telling you now that the life I lead is dangerous...Not only to me but to the people around me. Now that you've...*surprisingly*...become a big part of me... I can't promise that you won't be forced into being involved with it as well..." Harry told her, his face grim and lost in thought.

"I don't want to confuse you by pouring everything into you right away, Hermione...We've only gotten together this year and you've only started to learn more about me recently so I know this must all be too heavy to take in all at once... But I must ask you one thing, Hermione...Just one thing." Harry said, now pulling away to look Hermione in her eyes with a firm but sincere gaze.

Hermione nodded, her form trembling in nervousness as she leaned back into his embrace again, not wanting to lose the comforting heat Harry's warm frame offered her. Harry sighed, allowing the embrace once more.

"I need your trust on this one, Hermione. I need for you to trust me with my own skills and abilities. Don't be afraid for me because it's not going to help me at all. I need your trust more than anything else. And if you want to help me...that'll be the best way to do it." He told her, lifting her chin up so Hermione was staring up into his deep eyes.

"Harry, I—"

"*Please*, Hermione. *Trust* me. Trust me to keep myself safe...Trust me in doing this. Trust me the way AJ does...The way Draco does...The way all my friends do.... You're the only one left now. If you don't, I'll only be walking into that maze with a heavy feeling of anxiety because I *didn't* have your belief that I could do it." Harry said softly, his tone almost pleading in a way that made Hermione's heart melt.

Reluctantly, she managed a tearful laugh and nodded very lightly, wiping at her wet eyes. "I do, Harry... I've always trusted you. *Always*. If I didn't...Would I have forgiven you that day during the ambush?" She pointed out, managing to hold his hand in hers and giving it an encouraging squeeze.

Harry shook his head, a wry grin forming on his handsome features as he squeezed her hand back with a sigh in relief. "Promise me one thing though, Harry... Just one...Please?" Hermione suddenly added, her eyes looking painfully desperate.

Harry nodded, his eyebrows coming to meet on his forehead.

"Promise me you won't get hurt...That no matter what happens in there, you'll return to me...That you'll come back out...*alive*... Please? I don't care if you win or not...I just want you to return to my arms safe and unharmed...Can you do that?" Hermione whispered, another fearful tear rolling down her cheek.

Harry looked away guiltily, not meeting her gaze in fear of her seeing the own fear reflected there. "Hermione...I can't make promises I'm not so sure I can keep...But I can promise you that no matter what happens... I will keep fighting. I won't give up without a bloody hell of a fight...After all, I'm Harry Potter... And I'm a Slytherin, remember?" He managed to kid lightly, offering Hermione a sly wink to ease her tension.

He didn't want to worry her...Not now... Now he just wanted to enjoy this moment with her before he allowed himself to let go altogether and focus *completely* on the next task at hand... He wasn't stupid...Voldemort was going to attack soon... And Harry had a feeling his nemesis wasn't going to waste the opportunity during the third task to so...

He was way past all childish break-ups and love problems now...This wasn't another Parvati Patil scheme against him this time... This time, it was real...This time, it was danger and he couldn't afford to take it lightly. *Playtime is certainly over... It's time to face the dark lord once again...* Harry thought to himself, a dark look descending upon his face but before Hermione could see it, he shook it off, masking his face with a smile.

Hermione laughed again, nodding and wiping her eyes before she squeezed his waist again, resting her head on his shoulder. "Arrogant Slytherin prat..." She spoke softly, causing Harry to smirk and burst into a round of amused laughter.

She smiled and watched him give her a warm smile she knew he would have never given anyone else, making her heart melt instantly at the love she saw in his eyes. "*Always...*" He grinned, nodding before leaning forward and giving her a kiss on the forehead.

Hermione instantly sobered and a thoughtful expression crossed her face as she pulled the book Harry held in his hands, her eyes searching through the pages. Harry scowled at her but peered over her shoulder as Hermione flipped through several pages, stopping to mark a page where she found a particular useful spell before turning to the next one.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, amusement clearly in his voice as Hermione looked up and gave him a smile. "Harry... I know I probably won't make such a difference in training an already powerful wizard like you...I mean...Especially now that you have all your friends and even Prof. Snape training you with those advanced spells but I just...well... I wanted a chance to train with you as well." She admitted, dropping her eyes to the floor when a blush spread on her cheeks.

Harry snorted and raised her face up to meet him again, allowing her to see the teasing sneer on his face. "Well you've certainly taught me one thing so far...Keep your weak areas protected at all times..." He retorted, gesturing to the book Hermione held in her hands.

Hermione laughed at the expression on his face, her brown eyes dancing with glee as they eyed Harry's indignant glare. "It's not funny,

Granger..." He muttered, his voice a low growl but Hermione finally obliged, breathing hard as she spoke again.

"Anyway... I guess it will make me feel better knowing I was able to help you be safe and prepare yourself any way I can...If it's okay of course. I've already found several spells here we could learn together which I'm sure will be helpful during the tournament." Hermione suggested, looking back to see Harry now currently occupied with smothering her neck with kisses.

"Harry, were you listening to what I just said?!" Hermione asked angrily, trying to shove him away but Harry barely moved at all, his hands tightening around her form in effect.

"Of course I did... And sure...I think it's a good idea, Granger...But...Let's train later..." Harry murmured, his lips traveling up her neck over to kiss her gently along her jaw line and continuing on upwards until he had planted a kiss on her earlobe.

The book Hermione was holding instantly slipped to the floor as her arms wound around him and pulled him closer to her, her own lips moving on their own will and claiming Harry's hungrily. Harry willingly granted the kiss, his hand reaching up to pull off Hermione's neatly tied ponytail to let the girl's sleek brown hair cascade gracefully down her shoulder free for him.

Harry slowly began running his fingers through those locks again, his other hand moving to travel slowly along her curves, succeeding in making the Gryffindor lean into his touch. Both were unaware that they were currently backing up as they kissed, edging dangerously closer and closer to the edge of the pool behind them

Inch by inch it seemed, Harry's expensive black shoes were roaming closer to the pool's glossy sheen of clear blue water until finally he had the consciousness to pull away from Hermione in surprise, his eyes going wide in panic. "Hey, watch it Granger! We're going to—"

He never got to finish as he finally fell into the pool in a rather ungraceful dive unsuitable for Harry Potter, the loud splash causing Hermione to burst into a round of amused giggles. As soon as Harry had sputtered to the surface of the pool, his robes drenched and

clinging to his lean body, Hermione stopped and managed a sheepish smile in return.

“Why you good for nothing Gryffindor...Make yourself useful and help me up, will you?!” He muttered threateningly under his breath, an angry scowl on his face as Hermione nodded and obliged by offering a delicate limb. It was obvious that the girl was still holding back a hysterical wave of laughter as she did though.

“Here, Potter... Wait, *Potter!* Don’t you dare—”

Hermione stopped talking as well just as Harry smirked evilly and yanked her by the hand into the pool with him, succeeding in making an interesting splash as Hermione’s body was thrown forward ungracefully into the water.

It was Harry’s turn to laugh this time as Hermione made to surface immediately, her brown eyes blazing angrily at him as soon as her head had reappeared from the water. “Potter you bloody jerk! That was rude and uncalled for!” She yelled furiously at him, running her hand angrily through her hair to get it out of her drenched face.

Harry only laughed harder in response, his lips set into a lopsided grin that made Hermione’s knees buckle underneath her. Without warning, he stepped away and began pulling off his robes, exposing a lean chest that made Hermione’s breath hitch in her throat.

Hearing this, he turned and gave her an arrogant smile. “Like what you see, don’t you Granger?” He drawled evenly, grinning again as he saw her embarrassed glare before he ducked under the water, swimming a few strokes of perfect freestyle to the other side of the pool.

Hermione watched him silently in admiration, loving the way his lean muscles seemed to move when he swam easily through the water almost as gracefully as when he flew through the air. Smiling at herself, she ducked into the water and followed after him in a soft breaststroke, stopping abruptly when she reached Harry’s waiting form.

“Harry...Where did you learn to swim like that? Surely your relatives would never have taught you...” She asked softly, allowing Harry to pull her to him, his arms moving to unbutton her robes before he spoke.

“They didn’t. I learned it from a man AJ and I met in the park one time when we were younger...around 10 years old I think... Anyway, he was out swimming in the lake in the park when we met him. AJ and I were always in the park to get away from our relatives and I suppose we just got lucky... He saw us swimming around and decided to offer us a few lessons every morning for free.” Harry explained with a small smile.

“The Dursleys allowed you?” Hermione asked curiously as Harry finally managed to get the robe off and started working on her blouse, his hands almost as impatient as he himself seemed.

“They didn’t. We just snuck out every morning on our own... We never got caught, luckily...” Harry said carelessly, now pulling her closer and kissing the exposed skin of her shoulders. “Enough about that... Let’s get to more important matters shall we?” He whispered seductively as his hands now began working on the clasp of her bra.

“Hmm...But what about your training?” Hermione managed to answer back, briefly catching a glimpse of the serpent birthmark on Harry’s shoulder again. *The mark... I haven’t gotten to talk to him about it yet...* She thought, her eyes narrowing in suspicion as she tried to run a finger over the offending symbol but she didn’t have much time to dwell on it as Harry pulled her to him again and kissed her deeply, scrambling her thoughts altogether.

“We’ll train later...*much* later...” He replied, his voice husky with lust as Hermione now began working on the clasp of his belt, wanting nothing more than to feel Harry’s love... To be assured physically of his love once again... To remind herself of how much she knew Harry loved her despite everything Pansy had told her before...

*He loves me...I love him...And nothing will ever change that again...Even against all the odds...* She thought, finally submitting herself into the oncoming atmosphere as she let Harry make love to her once more...

Professor Moody watched with an eerie smile on his face as the two students walked off back into the secret Slytherin chamber, briefly amused at the irritated comments the brunette girl was shouting to the Slytherin who carried her in his arms.

Oh yes, he knew alright... Knew of the obvious tension and anticipating in everyone's mind right now...Especially young Harry's... He knew that they were all nervous for the upcoming third task... *And they are right to be...* He added silently to himself, chuckling as he slowly began making his way back to his office, a scarily fervent smile on his face as he thought of what was to come.

*Yes, Mr. Potter... Enjoy the rest of your life while you still can... Because this time, I assure you... I won't fail. I will kill you... and right before I do...I'll make sure you bear witness to seeing your sister die before you...* He thought with a sinister smile on his face.

*Lord Voldemort will rise again...Stronger...More powerful than ever before... And this time...There will be no more foul ups... Harry Potter will fail...He will die... And for it, my master shall finally acknowledge my allegiance and endless loyalty to him... He will at last...appreciate my efforts and I shall be his most faithful servant...* He mused, an overly excited smile lighting up his maniacal face.

*Yes indeed, Mr. Potter... Prepare yourself all you want... Your time is nearly up... The plan is just about completed. Soon, you shall meet your end... As your parents have... As your sister will... I will never rest until I serve my master in killing off the entire Potter bloodline...* "Soon, Potter... Soon..." He finished out loud, his face setting back into a grim smile before he rounded the corner, walking off into the darkness.

His harsh words echoed as he walked away, surprisingly leaving behind a chilly aura of death as the still silence carried them off into the wind. "Soon, Potter... Soon..."

**A/N:** To be honest, I REALLY did **NOT** like that chapter but hopefully, you'll all excuse me on that one. REALLY sorry about it... Now that the story is just about ending, my imagination in this one is just about

ending as well. I've always thought the hardest part of writing a story was finishing it off but hey... I'm still willing to try for you guys. Now I know that chapter was truly disappointing since nothing much happened but to make it up to you, **I will be trying to get the next one up REALLY soon. Hopefully by May 1 so be on the look out. Again, REALLY SORRY for that sucky chapter but that was all I could do at the moment.**

**Coming up in the following chapters:** Another encounter with Pansy and Lila, Harry's Divination Dream, The Pensieve scene of course, a Draco/AJ scene and hopefully, if I can fit it in, some third task training with the Slytherins and Professor Snape. For the future big events, of course the **THIRD TASK** and the confrontation between Harry and Voldemort. Yes... It is ending... sigh There are now about 5 more chapters left I think... Hopefully I can finish it by May or June. Well, though I know that was probably the suckiest chapter on the planet, **PLEASE REVIEW!**

**ADDITIONAL NOTE:** Also, I've noticed that well... due to my slow updates... grins sheepishly a lot of you are emailing me about the story and asking me questions about the next chapter and all... And from the other emails I received, I've noticed that most of you even check frequently for an updated chapter. To make it easier, I've currently just started a **yahoogroup** for all of you guys who wish to be alerted immediately when I update a chapter or who want to keep in touch with me about updates, questions about the story or anything at all related to AAA. I also will be posting occasional sneak peaks or ideas about the story in this group as well as hold several role playing sessions with you guys about the story. In here, you guys can talk to Harry or Draco themselves (played by myself) about anything and also to the other AAA characters by your request. It's called **The Order of Serpents** by the way and it is dedicated solely for AAA related activities. Members here will be able to get first dibs on updates so PLEASE join in okay? A word of warning though...most of the group is over-run by Slytherins so other house members, be prepared. If you're interested, check my profile for the URL. Hope to see you there! mwah!



## Chapter 31- A Dark Foreshadowing

"Ron, keep your voice down! You don't want the whole school knowing, don't you?!" Hermione hissed as she, Ron and Seamus made their way to the Owlery a couple of days later at night time, watching warily as a couple of Seventh year Slytherins gave them resentful sneers.

A stunningly beautiful blonde Hermione recognized as Fiona Jameson gave her one look-over before she turned and whispered loudly to the girl beside her whom Hermione could only recognize as the head girl that year, the two girls making sure she heard every word.

"That's her! Hermione Granger!" She whispered, looking back to glare resentfully at her with a wicked smirk. "Harry's definitely had much better..." The girl beside her agreed, shaking her head but Hermione wasn't about to let them bother her. She had grown accustomed to those sayings right now.

"I swear, Hermione... I don't know how you manage to put up with all of those nasty, annoying Slytherin gits... Why don't you just give up on this relationship?" Ron asked bluntly, giving the passing girls his meanest glare.

Hermione gave him a cold look in response, her brown eyes darkening in indignation. "Because, Ron, I have already gotten so far already...Do you honestly expect me to give up just because of a few problems? I'm not like you!" She hissed, instantly regretting her words when she saw Ron's face cloud over in guilt.

Seamus bristled and shook his head, watching the both of them. "That was harsh, Hermione... Even for you...You know that Ron has his own problems right now...You didn't have to do that." He pointed out, looking disapproving.

Hermione instantly sobered and reached out to place her hand on Ron's shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze, causing the redhead to stop walking and face her. "Seamus' right...I'm sorry, Ron...I guess I'm just a bit nervous about the upcoming Third task and everything..." She said softly, giving him a smile.

Ron nodded and offered a smile back, shrugging at her apology. "Don't worry about it... I guess I deserved it...Kind of... I just don't like those girls treating you that way, Hermione...Potter should be the one telling them off for you, you know." He said resentfully, glaring again as more Slytherins passed them in the halls.

"Yeah, is he too much of a coward to face his own housemates or something?" Seamus quipped, smiling flirtatiously as Mandy Brocklehurst passed them by, causing the Ravenclaw to smile back in response.

Hermione sighed again, shaking her head just as they rounded the corridor. "He's too busy with his Third task training I guess...You know him, he's *a/ways* out to be one hundred percent perfect in everything..." She said, her voice trailing off distantly.

"Yeah... even in being a hapless bastard..." Seamus whispered to Ron, causing them both to break out into a round of hearty laughter.

Hermione glared at them, her brown eyes flashing in annoyance. "Look, anyway, as I was saying, it couldn't *possible* be Harry who attacked Viktor Krum that night okay? I've spoken to *both* parties while the both of you are relying on *rumors*." She pointed out, giving them a pointed look.

Ron and Seamus both scowled but found that Hermione had definitely proven a marvelous point. "Well fine... Maybe it was Crouch... He must have disapparated or something right after he did it! I heard from Ginny that some of the other people are saying Crouch was probably after Potter... I bet any one ten galleons that Potter attacked *him*." He tried again, causing Hermione to growl in utter irritation.

"Ron! You can *not* apparate *or* disapparate into Hogwarts okay? Will you give it a rest? Look, I know you would much rather side with Durmstrang than Slytherin even if Slytherin *is* the group from your own school but Harry would *not* do that. He had no *reason* to attack Krum." Hermione said in exasperation, sighing.

Seamus however, seemed to think keenly on Ron's idea and nodded, his eyes lighting up in thought.

"Yes he does, Hermione. Krum likes *you* and you know how possessive Potter gets... How about this? Crouch probably heard about the Harry-Viktor rivalry going on and he goes to Hogwarts to fix it right? Then...Potter snaps...And attacks *him*...And then after that, he obliviates Krum's memory before stunning him for revenge and then leaving him there. *However*, since I've heard from the champions that they've seen the two go into the forest together, he thought people would mock him for such a cowardly ambush so he ran to Dumbledore *pretending* to be the hero so that Krum would be the one humiliated instead." He finished, gazing up at them in self-satisfaction.

Hermione and Ron both blinked in utter surprise and disbelief, shaking their heads at Seamus' twisted story and theory before they walked off, leaving the Irish Gryffindor hurrying after them with a cute pout on his handsome face.

"What?! It's possible!" He urged but he didn't push it further, listening as his two best friends began ranting off again.

"What did Potter tell you about what happened anyway? Everyone's curious!" Ron asked, looking at Hermione expectantly as the brunette bit her lip, looking slightly uncertain.

"Well.. I can't exactly tell you *everything* but the most important part was that he mentioned You-know-who getting stronger...That struck me the most..." Hermione whispered, feeling a shudder race down her spine.

Ron and Seamus both raised an eyebrow, giving each other amused smirks. "Hermione... The answer is simple. Your boyfriend is a raving lunatic...And so is Crouch. They're out of their minds!" Seamus kidded, laughing.

Hermione shook her head, her expression grim as she spoke. "I doubt even *Harry* would cause such a scandal about something like *that*...No... I swear that Mr. Crouch is definitely a suspicious character... Harry doesn't seem too fond of *him*..." Hermione whispered, more to herself than to her two best friends.

Ron snorted, rolling his eyes. "Tell me about it... Percy however is absolutely at his beck and call... Doing all his instructions and everything like a trained little puppy...Wonder what he would think of his *role model* when he gets caught doing something suspicious..." He thought, shaking his head.

"The best person to catch him in the act would be Prof. Moody! I swear that man practically has eyes all over the whole bloody school and grounds!" Seamus exclaimed, laughing as they reached the stairs leading up to the Owlery.

"Or no! Maybe it was Professor Snape, that slimeball! Maybe *he* attacked Krum and Crouch or something! I mean, both were against his champion right?" Ron supplied as-a-matter-of-factly but one glare from Hermione silenced him as he managed a sheepish smile at her.

"Oh would you two just give it a rest! I am *not* discussing these private matters with you anymore! I shouldn't have told you about them in the first place... They're Harry's problems!" She realized, feeling ashamed of herself.

Ron and Seamus rolled their eyes at each other. "Yeah... You wouldn't want to break *Harry's* trust now, would you?" Seamus said sarcastically, pronouncing Harry's name with a hint of acid in his voice.

Hermione was about to answer when she stopped abruptly, hearing loud familiar voices in the Owlery just as they reached the door.

"....blackmail...trouble..."

"...playing dirty... Ministry of Magic..."

"Are you sure? Blackmail?! Merlin....higher than that!"

Ron immediately pushed through the doors, recognizing his brother's voices and at once, Hermione and Seamus found themselves staring at Fred and George's surprised and slightly irritated faces, both redheads gazing at them in silence.

"What are you doing here?" Ron and Fred both managed to ask at the exact same time, causing the others around them to blink in surprise.

"Sending a letter?" Seamus offered, biting down a laugh as he noticed George had uttered the same thing.

"At this time of the night?!" Hermione asked instantly, fighting back a growl or irritation as once again, her words had coincided perfectly with Fred's.

The redhead grinned and gave the Gryffindor trio a wink, his eyes sparkling in mischief. "Oookay.. We won't ask if *you* won't ask..." He winked again and turned to the letter in his hands, casually sliding his hand over so the younger Gryffindors couldn't see the name it was addressed to.

"Who are you planning on blackmailing? Is that it? Are you going to stoop so low that you're going to be using Slytherin-handed tricks to get what you want?" Ron immediately blurted out, his blue eyes flashing angrily like lightning bolts at what he had heard.

Fred and George looked at each other before offering a forced innocent grin at Ron, shaking their heads in complete unison. "Of course not, Ronnie-boy... We would never stoop to *their* level...Besides, I was only joking when I said that." George said calmly, keeping a grin on his face.

"Sure didn't sound like a joke, George." Ron pointed out, surprising Hermione and Seamus at how he was easily able to tell his identical twin brothers apart like that.

Fred looked somewhat annoyed as he answered, promptly turning around to tie a letter to a barn owl before turning back to face them. "Ron, stay out of our business okay? We would gladly appreciate—"

"Oh I think mum would want to hear of you both using blackmail to get what you want..." Ron warned and instantly, Fred's eyes flashed slightly, his hands clenching as he slowly released the large barn owl into the night sky above them.

"You know there, little brother... You had better be careful... You were starting to sound like dear old Percy there for a second... Keep this up and you just might make *prefect*..." George teased lightly, giving Ron a grin as he easily ruffled his younger brother's hair when he passed.

"I will *not*!" Ron retorted indignantly, his cheeks flushing crimson.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Fred asked just as he was about to leave the room after George, only staying to hear Ron's short response.

Ron just gave him a calm glare. "I'm here to send my letter to mum... I think she'll be quite interested to know what I just heard so I might be making a few adjustments..." He said slowly, pulling the prepared letter from his pocket.

Neither Fred or George acknowledged him, both chuckling as they made their way out. "You wouldn't dare." Was all George said before the door finally closed behind them, leaving the three younger Gryffindors in silence.

"You're really going to rat them out, mate?" Seamus asked as he leaned over and began stroking the nearest owl from where he stood. The eagle owl gave an indignant hoot and flew away from him, looking irritated at having been touched by another wizard.

"Hmph... Stupid eagle owl..." Seamus complained, scowling in insult at the bird in question which seemed to smirk at him in response. Hermione gave a sharp intake of breath, rolling her eyes at him. "Seamus, that was an *eagle* owl. Eagle owls usually let themselves be touched only by their masters or by people their masters give permission too." Hermione informed him, causing the boy to scowl even more.

"I knew that, Ms. Know-it-all... So anyway, Ron, are you going to tell your mum?" Seamus asked, turning to Ron again, who was now hastily tying a letter to a bleary-eyed Errol in front of him.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something in contrast when she felt something land swiftly onto her shoulder, causing her to look up

and meet Hedwig's reproachful amber eyes looking at her with a hesitant sense of recognition. Hermione smiled and stroked the beautiful white owl gently, causing Ron to gape at her in surprise.

"Mione...That's Potter's snotty little owl you've got there... She barely let's anyone else touch her, how did you manage to tame her like that?" He asked curiously, raising an eyebrow at Hermione's blush.

"I—I don't know... Probably she likes my aura or something... She's such a beautiful owl isn't she?" Hermione answered softly, stroking Hedwig again as the owl gave a hoot of appreciation, obviously enjoying Hermione's touches.

Ron shrugged and turned back to answer Seamus, who was now watching Hermione in slight disbelief. "Anyway, no Seamus, I am *not* ratting my brothers out to my mum... They're actually pretty serious now... They're really planning on putting up that Joke shop they've always wanted. I always thought that was just some hoax to get to mum's nerves but they're really trying to earn enough galleons to actually put it up... They're completely dedicated to it... They want to secure their future. Who am I to interfere?" He explained, the last sentence coming out as a mumble.

Seamus looked mildly impressed, nodding in response. "Wicked... But you don't think they'd be doing anything...*illegal* now would you?" He asked, causing Hermione to stiffen in nervousness and uneasiness.

Ron laughed, shaking his head. "No, of course not! I doubt they'd be doing anything like that to get money... I mean, what are you implying? My brothers resorting to dark magic or ways to earn a living? We were raised to resent that kind of thing.." He explained, giving them a shrug.

"But still Ron, maybe you *should* tell your mother about it... You never know... It could start with blackmail but later on...They'll be going against the Ministry of Magic! Better safe than sorry right? Or if not your mother, how about Percy?" Hermione suggested, looking nervous.

Ron's eyes widened at her in disbelief. "Tell *Percy*?! Are you mad? He'd turn them in without a second thought! Look, let's just forget about that okay? I'm done, let's get going." He urged, shutting the owlery window where Errol had just sailed off from and following his two best friends out the door.

They walked in silence for a couple of minutes before Hermione spoke up just as they were turning towards another corridor, "Okay then Ron, but if your parents find out about this, I'd hate to be the one to say 'I told you so'." She said pointedly, causing Ron to roll his eyes fondly in response.

"I know Hermione. I know. So...You and the slimy pretty-boy prince have another date tonight huh? It's no wonder you do all your homework during the morning now..." He asked, slowly changing the topic as Seamus laughed in response and Hermione blushed at Ron's tone of voice.

"Yes, we do Ron. But I'm afraid those are private matters." Hermione muttered back, trying to fight down the blush from spreading onto her cheeks as Ron smirked at her, looking highly amused.

"Where do you two go off to, anyway? During these dates I mean..." Seamus asked, his pert eyes sparkling with seen curiosity.

Hermione opened her mouth to answer but even before the words had left her mouth, she stopped in shock at the scene that greeted them just as they had turned into the next corridor.

There, cowering away in absolute fear in front of them, was none other than the Hufflepuff girl she knew as Hannah Abbot being surrounded by a large, sneering group of Slytherin girls with obvious resentment etched onto their features.

From Hannah's tangled hair, it appeared as though the one in front of her whom she was kneeling to— Pansy Parkinson, had been yanking repeatedly at her blonde locks, slapping the Hufflepuff along the way she did.



Ron and Seamus both gasped and made to step forward and help her but Hermione held them back gently, wanting to hear what the other Slytherin girls had to say before they intervened.

Hannah squelched another gasp of pain as Pansy laughed lightly and gestured to Millicent Bulstrode behind her, who promptly nodded and yanked Hannah up by her robes, slamming the much smaller girl against the harsh wall of the corridor.

"P-please...What did I do?!" Hannah pleaded, trying to wrench herself out of the huge girl's grasp but Millicent made no answer, only waiting for further instructions from Pansy before doing anything else.

"You mean to tell me you honestly don't know, Abbot?" Lila answered for her from where she stood behind Pansy with a group of other Slytherin girls Hermione only knew by their faces, a bandage strapped onto her nose from her incident with AJ before.

"No, I don't know what any of you want! I haven't done anything!" Hannah whispered back, struggling to free herself but to no avail. Millicent's hands felt like iron around her slim neck.

"I guess *that's* expected...You are, after all, a *Hufflepuff*...And a mudblood one at that... But I'll tell you then... Being in the most influential and the most elusive house in school, we Slytherins are only out to protect one another...And no matter what beliefs you may have against us, we *don't* enjoy going against our own kind for little matters like...*you*..." Pansy started, flipping a glossy curtain of blonde hair over her shoulder as she stared at the other girl in disgust.

"I—I don't understand..." Hannah managed to say, wincing as the Slytherins laughed in response.

"Well then understand *this*, Abbot— As the *only* house with secured purity or power of blood, we take it upon ourselves to make sure we protect *our* men from falling into filthy, eager little hands like you...*or* Hermione Granger for that reason." Pansy continued, her elegantly made-up eyes regarding Hannah icily as she spoke.

"Blaise? Is he what this is all about?! I—"

"How dare you even consider trying to date him? Blaise, for your information, is one of the few most eligible bachelors in our house. He's of a pure-blooded, prominent Wizarding family, he's intelligent, he's a powerful wizard *and* he's definitely got the looks and body as well...Did you honestly believe we'd give up him *that* easily to a Hufflepuff like *you*?!" Pansy stated calmly, raising a perfectly-plucked eyebrow to emphasize her point.

"We spend all our time—every bloody minute—making sure we look devastatingly beautiful because as the female daughters of families such as ours, we hope to catch the best of pureblooded wizards as well... Guys like Blaise...Guys like Draco or Harry...Guys with *power*...We're not going to give them up to such *plain* girls outside of our house." Another Slytherin girl added calmly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Oh you are just about the biggest snobs I have ever met! I mean, who cares about all those popular Wizarding families anymore in these days?! There are hardly any purebloods left!" Hannah blurted out in frustration but they ignored her, carrying on with their rant.

"We only mingle with their own kind—For to be the best would mean to be among the best. That's why we're all *very* protective of one another...We thought for a while that by ignoring Blaise a couple of weeks, he would revert back to his proper senses and finally dump you like the trash you are but he was a bit more stubborn than we expected. Blaise is very important to us...and *everyone* is prone to make mistakes... So instead, we chose to attack the problem by attacking the source...the *cause*—*you*." Fiona Jameson finally finished, stepping forward to stand beside Pansy, crossing her arms over her chest.

Hermione watched with wide eyes as the seventh-year girl easily smirked the way she had seen oh-so-many Slytherins did before her, her cold eyes never wavering from Hannah's petite form.

"Blaise *loves* me. He said so himself." Hannah managed to say stubbornly and the girls burst out laughing at that, their giggles echoing through the dark corridor.

"You fool... That's just one of the many over-used ploys our men use to get them what they want...They don't really mean it. And we're trained enough to accept that. After all, love is just an overrated waste of time—an illusion for losers like Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors." Pansy drawled slowly, loving the way Hannah's eyes darkened at the harshness of her words.

"We know better. No matter what it may seem like...Slytherins will always be Slytherins... Especially when it comes to the guys...What they feel is *not* love...It is a sense of *possession* for what they believe is theirs. Love means nothing to us the same way the 'a serious relationship' is only a prequel into a formal merging of bloodlines...*No* emotional attachments." She explained cruelly, a mocking smile on her pale face.

"That's why they enjoy our company so much... That's why no matter what happens, they *always*, '*always*' come back to us one way or another. We don't cling on to the unnecessary emotional aspects of a relationship...We're *realistic*... *And* we're exposed more to...*physical* matters at an early age... We're fully experienced to satisfy them...And they *adore* us for that...So you see...Blaise will be back. I *promise* you that. As will Harry. They all come back." She finished, finally smirking in triumph when she saw that that she had succeeded in her goal.

The hope in Hannah's eyes seemed to fade immensely now as her pretty face seemed to darken in realization as she pondered the words, ignoring the looks the girls around her were giving her as she did so.

Hermione couldn't blame her... Those words... Those words hurt...Because...Well...As much as she didn't want to admit it, they made *excellent* points. And frankly, *that* surprised her as well. She hadn't known Pansy to speak so much in one sitting... She had honestly assumed the girl was downright brainless and superficial.

Perhaps she had just simply thought wrong considering Pansy Parkinson was also one of the many excelling Slytherin students in the year... Second to AJ in the house in fact...But that wasn't important right now...

Those girls...They made excellent points— Pansy, Lila, Fiona... If anything, Hermione found out tonight why exactly they prided being grown up in a family as prestigious as theirs...It seems they were obviously well trained and modeled because of it... Trained...Mentally, physically and even emotionally developed to marry a *tyrant*...

It appeared as though Slytherin gave much more priority into keeping the old Wizarding families than to matters of war regarding the Dark Lord and such...It looked as though despite the rumors, they kept true to what they say. They *were* loyal to one another...And they bowed to no one. House allegiance came first before the light-dark war... It *always* came first to them.

According to what Harry told her about them, they were definitely *not* death eaters...There had been a few who had gone over to the dark side but like any true serpent, the house allegiance and pledge of select loyalty kept still...Nothing ever changed that. They were very private...Open and respectful *only* to each other...Which is probably why they feel so resentful towards those of other origins...

*They're perfect for one another...* She thought bitterly but as soon as the words had entered her mouth, she banished the thought immediately from her mind. What the hell was she talking about? Here she was again... *Harry loved her! He loved her!* And he had already proven that so many times before...It was partially because of her doubts that he had to prove it in the first place! She would not doubt him again.

But as she finally grew aware once more of Ron's gasp beside her, she heard Pansy's harsh words echoing in her head... *They don't really mean it. And we're trained enough to accept that. After all, love is just an overrated waste of time—an illusion for losers like Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. We know better.... What they feel is not love...It is a sense of possession for what they believe is theirs. Love means nothing to us the same way the 'a steady relationship' is only a prequel into a formal merging of bloodlines...No emotional attachments.*

*No... They're just saying that... That's not true...* She assured herself confidently, nodding before she turned again just in time to see Hannah finally snapping back to her senses and looking at the group of girls as though they were the most disgusting things she had ever seen in her life.

"You Slytherins are nothing but disgusting monsters...*All* of you..." She hissed, realization and awakening finally clear in her crystal blue innocent eyes as she eyed them one by one.

The girls laughed at this, pleased smirks gracing their faces. "Thank you, dear... I do believe that was the sweetest thing any Hufflepuff has ever said...Or *gotten* the chance to say to us." Pansy drawled, her smirk widening in utter amusement.

"So...What do you expect me to do? Break up with Blaise because of your threats? Just because I'm a Hufflepuff doesn't mean I'm stupid!" Hannah snapped angrily at them, now struggling fiercely with Millicent to be freed.

"Actually dear, that's *exactly* what it means." A stunningly beautiful brunette one year younger than Pansy pointed out, earning another round of laughter from the group.

"I'll tell him what you did... He'll fight for how much he loves me... I trust him." Hannah said shakily although Hermione wasn't that sure if she was as confident of her words as her voice sounded.

"Sure...Go ahead...Tell him... Make him feel more shameful and disgraced of himself *and* apprehensive because of the hefty demands his father makes for him all the time... You are, after all, the one big mistake in his life...You're the thorn in his side...The one reason he's being shoved in the dirt. He'll come to his senses soon...There are just too many reasons to leave you, dear..." Lila drawled sweetly, smiling at her.

Hermione clenched her hands tightly into fists as she felt her two best friends promptly do the same beside her. Alright, they were just about going too far this time... Hermione felt a surge of concern as she Hannah's usually bright blue eyes filling with harsh tears.

"H-he... I—I....You want me to break up with him?" She asked again only this time, it was in a weak, defeated whisper rather than the confident tone she had used before.

"Better *you* break up with him first before *he* does, right? Come now, dear...We're all women here...We're trying to save you less humiliation...See? We are not as cruel and deceitful as you all perceive us to be right?" Pansy said sweetly, a fake smile on her lips as she slowly pushed Millicent aside and gingerly patted Hannah's shoulder as though she was reluctant to do so.

Hermione thought Hannah wasn't going to do anything but couldn't help the grin on her face when Hannah promptly looked Pansy right up in the face and spit right into the taller girl's face.

The Gryffindor trio winced right after, covering their ears. Pansy Parkinson sure had a hell of a shrilly scream when she put her heart into it...

"Why you disgusting, good-for-nothing, poor-excuse of a witch! You filthy, revolting, pathetic muggle!! How dare you tarnish me like that?! *Disgusting!* I could develop your horrid germs for Merlin's sake! You're a bloody Hufflepuff too!" Pansy began shrieking repeatedly as the Slytherin girls crowded around her, moving to help her wipe her face.

"YOU STUPID BITCH!! HIT HER!" Pansy screamed at Millicent, who made to punch Hannah but Hermione had had enough. She finally stepped forward, throwing her friends a look to tell them to keep away.

"Hey, leave her alone, Parkinson!" Hermione finally yelled out, finally drawing the Slytherins' attention to her but they just smirked and ignored her, turning back to Hannah's form.

"Ignore the mudblood, we'll deal with *her* some other time. Right now, we'll only deal with this Hufflepuff...Granger is next soon enough. Now hit her!" Pansy said again, this time her eyes narrowing sadistically as Millicent raised a fist again, nodding in assent but before her fist could make contact with Hannah's tearful face, a hand came out of nowhere and caught the offending limb in mid-air, causing Millicent to freeze in surprise.

Pansy and the others all looked up to see AJ Potter glaring icily at all of them with her emerald green eyes narrowed into slits, her face twisted into a horrible sneer of disgust and disbelief when she flung Millicent's fist away.

"Just what do you think you're all doing? A gang-up on a single student? Are you girls really *that* low, now?" She asked slowly, her voice soft and measured but obviously controlled with the anger she was trying to keep in.

Pansy shoved Lila out of her way and sauntered over to her, shoving AJ lightly and walking up to her until the two girls were face-to-face, both Slytherins' eyes dripping with anger. They failed to notice Hermione rushing over there and helping Hannah's sobbing form up, Ron and Seamus both politely keeping at a distance from the scene.

"Oh what do you know about it, Potter? Huh? Why are you stopping us?! You *know* this bloody bitch has been nothing but a nuisance to us ever since she whored herself to Blaise! And he's even your best friend for Merlin's sake!" Pansy hissed at her, her eyes flashing.

AJ didn't wince or react, steadily meeting her gaze. "Yes, I know. He *is* my best friend which is exactly why I have half a mind to stop you from treating his *girlfriend* like this. I thought we Slytherins were all about *respect*...Where is it now?" She asked softly again, her eyes bold and daring.

Pansy looked affronted as she stepped back in insult and narrowed her eyes at the other girl. "Oh so what's this? You're actually helping these *losers* out? What ever happened to *loyalty* then, Potter? Huh?" She countered, the sneer never leaving her face.

Before AJ could respond, Pansy turned to face the other Slytherins again, who were now shifting around uncomfortably ever since AJ's arrival. They didn't want to anger her... AJ was not only Harry's sister but apparently, though not officially declared yet, Draco's girlfriend.

"Look girls... Our little blushing, angelic *virgin* is playing the heroine by helping these losers..." Pansy said out loud, causing AJ to turn a faint shade of red in humiliation at the girl's public declaration when she saw the surprise on the Gryffindors' faces.

"*Fuck* you, Parkinson. I'm only making sure you don't disgrace our house...Staging a gang-up like this? You're just as bad as those Durmstrang jerks then, are you?" She taunted back, her eyes gleaming maliciously like her brother's.

"No, fuck *you*, Potter. I've just about put up with enough of your crap. You know, I knew from the very start that you weren't the same as us... You don't fit in here. Look at you know, you're actually going against your own group of loyal friends for bloody Abbot and..." Pansy looked up to see Hermione helping Hannah up.

"—*Granger*? You've been bringing nothing but shame and embarrassment to our house ever since first year...With your damn morals, your principles and your *fucking* weaknesses...*Pathetic*...I mean, I could handle it before but now..." Pansy trailed off, looking utterly revolted.

"You've *changed*, Potter...And believe me...It was for the worst...You don't support us anymore...Instead, you go against us and you go out of your way to contradict *everyone*... Perhaps that coma messed up your brain." Lila hissed in agreement, moving forward to pull Pansy back and help her wipe her face once more.

"You're *nothing* like your brother, AJ...Why can't you be like Harry? He's a true Slytherin...You however... You're just another *dud* that probably got lost into the wrong corners... You don't deserve Draco..." Pansy muttered, glaring at AJ as the other girl could only glare back silently, not answering her insults.

The entire group stood in tense silence as the two Slytherin girls faced off, each one unwilling to look away from the other's piercing gaze for fear of losing... AJ slowly narrowed her eyes at the other girl, keeping her face completely straight and emotionless. She would not be like them...She was *not* them...She had *class* and she would prove it by showing the other girls that she wasn't affected by their petty insults. After all, she didn't need their approval...She didn't need *them*.

Pansy shook her head once more before finally breaking the gaze and letting Lila drag her off back towards the dungeons, the two girls forgetting all about their original aim to attack Hannah and walking



away in utter disgust. Pansy turned to give her one last glare before flipping her hair over her shoulder as if to dismiss her.

AJ glared silently at the other Slytherin girls as well until finally, one by one, they took her hint and followed after the two girls, fidgeting uncomfortably once in awhile under AJ's demanding glare.

"Sorry about this, Potter..." A girl whispered apologetically to her as she passed, causing AJ to give a discreet nod of acknowledgement before the girl finally looked relieved and walked off, hurrying after her friends.

As soon as the girls had all gone, Hermione let out a huge sigh of relief and turned to look at AJ, surprised to see the other girl making to follow after the Slytherins as well.

"Wait! Potter wait!" Hannah exclaimed, reaching forward and grasping AJ by the arm to turn the Slytherin back around to face them. She blinked when saw AJ merely gazing back at her with a blank look, an eyebrow raised haughtily over icy green eyes.

"I...I just wanted to thank you, I guess... I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't saved me so—"

"I *didn't* save you, Abbot. I just did what I thought would be appropriate given the situation. You are, after all, Blaise's girlfriend and I pledge my commitment to my friends *before* house..." AJ answered coolly, ignoring the way Hannah's face fell in embarrassment.

"Oh...well...Thanks anyway then, Potter...You still helped me somewhat..." She mumbled foolishly, unsure of what else she could say as she turned and looked helplessly at Hermione.

Hermione however, gave AJ a bright smile of disbelief, utter amazement and admiration all at the same time. She always knew the Slytherin girl had a *noble* and *respectable* Gryffindor side to her no one knew about...

"You actually stood up for *us*, Potter...I'm pretty sure that was saving us...Never knew you had it in you...You would have made a great Gryff—"

"*Drop it*, Granger. I *didn't* save you. I just did what I knew I should have done." AJ snapped back coldly, her eyes flashing in panic and denial as she heard the words spoken out of Hermione's lips.

Hermione stopped but kept a small smile on her face, nodding her understanding before she gestured over to Ron and Seamus a couple of meters away, encouraging the two boys to join them.

"Potter, why did you do that?" Ron asked quietly, his blue eyes searching deep into AJ's while AJ just sighed and stepped away from them, her eyes dropping to the floor.

"I...I *don't* know...I seriously don't know, Weasley...I just couldn't stand it...Standing there while I watched my so-called friends picking on Hannah so harshly like that...It just didn't seem right...Didn't seem *human*...I somehow...I somehow felt...*appalled* by it...And I'm afraid to find out why..." She answered quietly, surprising the others at the sincerity found in her voice.

Hermione, Ron and Seamus looked at each other in the eye, a look of confusion crossing between them as Hannah watched AJ talking in disbelief, not used to seeing the Slytherin speak such honesty in a single sentence.

"Did you ever consider *not* being afraid of the reason and instead, try *accepting* it? You are after all, the *only* decent Slytherin I've encountered so far...Try to accept the goodness in your heart..." Seamus said softly, his eyes fixed intently on AJ's lowered gaze and watched as AJ slowly raised those normally cold emerald green eyes up to meet their faces.

What they saw surprised them once again into a stunned silence... AJ *smiled*. She actually *smiled* at them, her eyes brimming with sincere laughter and warmth so unbecoming of a Slytherin that Hermione felt like laughing at how it contrasted with her school robes.

"That sounded so...*clichéd*...Finnegan...So very Gryffindor..." She kidded lightly, managing a weak, choked laugh when she saw all the color drain out of Seamus' face, leaving the Irish boy gaping openly at her in disbelief.

"Excuse me...Potter...were you...Were you talking to *me*? Because I'm pretty sure I saw the ice bitch exterior melt for a second there when you *laughed*..." Seamus managed to kid as well as soon as he had recovered from the shock, causing Ron to laugh as well.

AJ's smile instantly sobered and a dark expression covered her pretty features, her eyes breaking contact with theirs once more. "Oh...Well excuse me... It's not as if I enjoy wearing this cold mask all the damn time you know...Merlin forbid I'm actually a human being underneath..." She muttered bitterly under her breath so that no one would hear but Hermione heard every word, her eyes softening as she watched AJ's facial expression change.

"I'm sorry, what?" Ron asked, looking confused but AJ snapped her head back up, a smirk instantly plastered on once again. "Nothing, Weasley. Look, if you all haven't got anything else to say, I'll be going now." She said nonchalantly, offering a sneer before she made to turn away but Ron instantly latched onto her arm, causing her to stop in shock and face him.

"Wait!" He blurted out, instantly blushing when he felt Seamus', Hermione's and Hannah's surprised eyes on him.

"I'm uh...er... I was hoping...Potter...I was hoping that I could talk to you for a second..." He murmured uncomfortably, shuffling his feet in nervousness as he spoke with a shy blush on his features.

AJ raised a curious eyebrow but nodded, her eyes reverting consciously to the others watching them. "*Alone*." Ron added hastily, eyeing the others for effect.

Hermione and Hannah both seemed to get the hint and nodded, walking off towards their house dormitories but Seamus didn't as he eyed the two with a large grin on his face. Hermione groaned and sauntered back over to pull the Irish Gryffindor with her before giving Ron a smile.

As soon as they were all gone, AJ turned to look at Ron again and was surprised to see him shuffling around nervously, the blush still evident on his cheeks. "Well? Speak up, Weasley, I haven't got all night...What's on your mind?" She asked confidently, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ron nodded and finally looked up at her, shoving his hands into his robe pockets to keep himself from fidgeting around. "Look Potter...I know I'm not exactly your favorite person right now... Especially after what I did after the Ball...Getting together with Lavender and all..." Ron started uncertainly, pausing to check for the Slytherin's reactions.

AJ just nodded for him to continue, her face completely neutral as she listened. Ron gulped before carrying on. "Well...Even so it never actually worked between the two of us at first...Well...I've been thinking a lot...about *us* lately...Especially the Yule Ball...And well...I was hoping that we could...you know, start over again and give it another shot..." Ron explained slowly, keeping his eyes trained on AJ's.

AJ's eyes seemed to widen slightly but she kept her emotions in check, feeling her heart pounding nervously in her chest as she anticipated what came next after this. "Give *what* another shot exactly, Ron—er...*Weasley*?" She asked carefully, trying to analyze his words.

Ron blushed at her question, biting his lip nervously before he replied, "*Us*, Potter."

AJ raised the other eyebrow now as she took a step backward and looked the handsome Gryffindor directly into the eye. "Us? Ron...There is no *us*..." She reminded him firmly, her face a mask of utter confusion and uncertainty.

Ron winced and nodded but he didn't seem to be giving up as he stepped closer and reached out for AJ's hand, holding the soft limb tenderly against his own that AJ couldn't help but admire once again, his Gryffindor boldness for the act. Compared to Draco's firm, strong grip, his was completely tender and gentle...Just as she had always dreamed...Just as she had always imagined...

*This is what I've always dreamed about... Ron asking me out in such tender, sincere actions... This is what I've always dreamed about and wanted... The perfect, romantic scenario with my dream guy...* AJ told herself, looking deep into Ron's gentle blue eyes.

*But then... If it is... Why don't I feel happy about it?* She asked herself sadly, feeling her heart clench in shame and guilt as she thought of a certain blonde Slytherin waiting for her.

"Potter... AJ... I know I haven't exactly been the best guy the last few weeks here but see... I've been thinking a lot about you lately these days... And I'll be honest—I don't know why but I'm curious as to why this is so... I need to find out what I feel for you, Potter... And I need your help... Will you give it another chance?" Ron persisted again, his hand squeezing hers in encouragement.

"Weasley, what are you talking about exactly? I need you to be a bit more specific here; I do NOT enjoy reading minds..." AJ spoke softly, her gaze focused on their intertwined hands and how much they seem to look perfect against each other.

Her dream boy... Her longtime crush... The boy she was absolutely certain would never hurt her in the way Draco can... He was the complete opposite of Draco... He was gentle, caring, compassionate, courageous... He was the *fairy tale* ending... The *happy, blissful* relationship and here he was, offering it freely to her...

But things are different now... It couldn't go back to the way they were... She had already given her heart away and she couldn't give something to another when it didn't belong to her anymore... No matter how much she *truly* wanted to at the moment... And she felt guilty because of it...

"It... I meant... give *it* just one chance... That night during the Yule Ball... I... I didn't exactly tell you how *I* felt but right now... I'm actually willing to go serious about this... I want a chance to get to know you, AJ... I'm sincere now..." He promised, stepping closer to her once more than they were only inches apart.

AJ couldn't force herself to step away, drawn by the innocence and gallant look in his earnest eyes. "Don't you... Don't you like Lavender

Brown? From what I heard, you two were pretty much going steady before I woke up... You're actually willing to throw that all away for someone like me? To date someone like me?" AJ asked pointedly in an attempt to change his mind, sighing in frustration as she ran a hand through her hair.

Ron flushed and opened his mouth to respond but AJ carried on, not giving him a chance to answer her question. "Ron—*Weasley*, you don't even know me yet... In fact, we don't even know anything about each other *at all*. I mean, I admit I had an obsessive crush on you my last three years but I honestly believe a crush was what it was and *will* ever be... And yes, it had been *my* mistake for believing that crush to be more and pursuing it like I did...We haven't even spoken to each other at all save for insults and already, you're risking a girl—*Lavender*, who *loves* you for a girl you just snogged a couple of times..?" AJ asked again, almost regretful of her words when Ron backed away from her in insult.

"Hey don't you make it sound like that, Potter! Look... I know I may have been a jerk to you in the past... but see... I'm willing to start over... I would *never* hurt you... I can be the guy you long for... Your prince charming... We match don't we AJ? You need someone like me... I know that... Why do you need to stay with such a jerk like Malfoy? Can't you at least give me one day...one date...one *chance*? I keep remembering what you said to me during our dance and—"

AJ sighed and stopped him by raising up their intertwined hands, slowly disentangling their fingers from one another in front of his disappointed gaze. "Ron, I've really been meaning to explain to you about what I said that night...See, when I said...*that*...I wasn't really talking to you, I was—"

"Well, well...Am I interrupting anything here?" A sarcastic, hateful and suspiciously *familiar* voice said, causing both AJ and Ron to jump in surprise and turn wide, horrified eyes to see Draco's cold, wounded glare at them, his silver eyes immediately riveting on AJ's guilty form.

"Draco...I—" But AJ found herself losing her voice at Draco's accusing glare, her hands trembling at the hate and the betrayal she

found in those beautiful orbs. Draco *never* looked at her that way before...

"Look, this is *not* what you think it is...I can explain..." AJ tried again and Draco answered her with a carefully measured sneer, his perfect mask covering any form of emotion AJ knew must be tearing him up inside. Draco always was a perfect Slytherin...He had mastered the art of hiding his feelings... He wasn't like *her*...

"Okay then, *Potter*...explain." He drawled slowly, making AJ wince at the harshness of his tone and the dark seething rage that was beginning to fill his eyes. She didn't like that look...It was the look that Harry and Draco had mastered over the years...It was the look that became the main reason why all the other houses were afraid of their house...It was the look of pure, unadulterated *malice*... A warning sign that danger was *very* near...

"Malfoy, before you jump to any conclusions, AJ was *not* doing anything wrong. I—"

"Shut the *fuck up*, Weasley!" Draco exploded, his eyes immediately flashing violently as he reached forward and yanked AJ roughly away from the Gryffindor, causing the girl to wince in pain at the brutal grip he had on her arm.

"You...Stupid...*Bitch*... You dare to cheat on *me*, AJ? *Me?! I gave everything to you...Well? Can you fucking explain yourself, now?*" Draco hissed under his breath, yanking AJ until they were face to face and he was glaring into her wincing features.

"Draco, you're hurting me! Let go!" AJ managed to say, trying to break free from his grasp but she winced again as his hand only tightened around her arm, his fingernails digging deep into her flesh.

She was completely scared now...Draco didn't look like the same boy she had dated only a couple of days ago...He didn't look like the boy who had saved her from her coma...He looked exactly what he was and will ever be...One-half of the Slytherin duo...The notorious leaders of Slytherin house...She had wanted to forget...

"Go ahead, Potter! Explain yourself! Why the *hell* were you here with Weasley?! Is there something you want to tell me?! You want to be with *him*, don't you? After everything I've done for you, you still want *him*?!" Draco yelled angrily again, now yanking her to him and slamming her body into the wall, trapping her easily with his own.

AJ cried out in pain but didn't make a move to plead or cry, merely meeting his icy glare with her own sincere gaze, hoping to somehow bring out the gentle side of Draco she knew he had for her but it seemed at that moment, he was lost within the blazing depths of his anger...

"How pathetic are you really, Potter? I'm everything you could bloody want! Girls like you...*better* than you ever day would *kill* to be my girlfriend and *you* have the nerve to cheat on *me*?! Who the bloody hell do you think you are?!" Draco hissed again, his other hand delving furiously into his robes for his wand.

AJ's eyes flashed in righteous anger at his words. Now *this* was the Draco Malfoy she knew...This was the Draco Malfoy they *all* knew...And she had been foolish enough to forget about it because of a few sweet talk and kisses...She should have known better...

"Then why don't you get *them* to be your fucking girlfriend, Malfoy?! You can't control me! You don't own me, dammit! I belong to *no one*!" She shouted back, her green eyes blazing with a sense of determination that Ron blinked in disbelief at the defiant tone in her voice.

As far as he could remember, AJ never had the initiative before to go against her fellow Slytherins' wishes... Sure, she squabbled with Malfoy a lot but she never actually went against what he said around others... *This* AJ was definitely a change... *That* was for sure...

Draco's eyes widened again, filling with a maniacal anger that she rarely saw in his cool, collected demeanor... Oh she had done it... She knew she had crossed the line this time but she couldn't help it...It seemed Draco thought that just because they were more open about their feelings, he had the right to tell her what to do...Well she never followed anyone...even when they younger...That was



probably one of the reasons she always argued with him in the first place.

"What did you say...Potter?" He whispered slowly in a deathly calm, steady voice that made AJ shiver at the anger she sensed dripping from every single word that came out of his lips. He didn't blink as he slowly raised his wand until it was pressing painfully onto the pulse point in her neck, causing her to cringe in fear for what was to come.

"Malfoy, let her go! Don't you dare hurt a woman! She never did anything wrong! If you want to vent out your bloody insecurities, take it out on me!" Ron butted in instantly, finally snapping out of his stupor to realize the situation at hand.

Draco instantly tensed and turned his gaze away from the trembling girl back to face the redhead, his face carefully setting back into a cool, unreadable and superior smirk of controlled fury. "You want to repeat that, Weasel?" He drawled calmly in a low growl, his voice betraying how much he wanted to tear the other boy into shreds.

Ron glared back and stepped up to him, ignoring the pleading looks AJ was giving him to stay out of their argument. "Yeah, Malfoy I do... You're nothing but an insecure little fool who hits women...That's *low*, Malfoy...Even for you... *Let...her...go...*" He said boldly, not at all intimidated at the fury in Draco's eyes.

Slowly, the hands Draco had pinned AJ onto the wall with slid off her and he turned to face Ron, his hand clenching angrily on the wand he still held tightly in his hand. AJ winced again as she carefully slid off the wall, clutching at the sore bruises she could feel forming on her arms and neck.

"You are asking for a death wish, Weasley... Always foolish...Just like your parents..." Draco sneered easily, arrogantly twirling his wand around his elegant fingers as he approached the redhead.

"At least *my* parents have done *nothing* to disgrace the family name, Malfoy...They aren't death eaters who bloody lick up to You-Know-Who's boots!" Ron countered back as he took out his own wand, causing Draco to tense in anger again.

AJ watched in silence, her face paling in fear... Draco was no easy opponent when it comes to dueling... Probably one of the reasons why Harry respects him the way he does... So far, the only student who had managed to beat her brother on rare occasions was Draco... This wouldn't be good at all...

For a long moment, the two boys just stared at each other in silence, their hands tight around their wands that AJ thought they were going to walk away but the thought vanished immediately when she saw the evil gleam in Draco's eyes.

"*Stupefy!*" Ron yelled, pointing his wand at Draco but Draco barely moved, keeping his eyes trained on Ron's moves.

"*Gustos.*" He muttered in a low growl, causing a faint glow of red light to surround him that immediately absorbed Ron's spell into thin air. Ron's eyes widened in alarm just as AJ stood up in panic to try and stop anything else from happening.

Draco merely smirked and raised his wand lazily into the air, his eyes gleaming. "*Obsssscurio!*" He hissed into a strange, eerie imitation of parseltongue that AJ shivered at the dark quality in his voice.

She watched, paling visibly as large black mist in the form of a serpent rose out of Draco's gleaming wand and immediately began circling around Ron, who stared at it in unhidden fear, watching as the mist loomed over them and began enveloping him into darkness.

"Malfoy, you dark bastard! What spell is this?!" Ron asked steadily, not showing his fear as he kept his wide blue eyes focused on the darkness wrapping itself around him. He felt a pang of panic when he felt his vision darkening into total blackness...As well as the surroundings around him...It was almost as if the mist was blinding him and all he could hear was Draco's harsh laughter.

"Draco! Stop it!" AJ screamed at him, now stepping in front of him so she could see the anger fueling his face once again.

"*Why?!* Why should I? It seems you're forgetting something here, AJ... You belong to *me*. No one else... It's about time you learned your lesson in that...It's about time you show me respect and

obedience." Draco stated calmly, knowing full well Ron could hear him.

"Respect? Obedience?! Draco, what the hell do you think I am? Your toy?! Look...Stop trying to treat me like those other girls, Draco okay? I am *not* like them! You can't own me just because we've decided to take our friendship to the next level!" She yelled back, feeling the tears start welling up in her eyes.

AJ couldn't help it now...She felt tears begin to gather in her eyes as this new side of Draco...This new dominating side she had never seen before scared her...It *frightened* her to think that Draco had the power to do this to her...To *be* this way to her...

He had been nothing but a complete gentleman and sweet romantic to her these past few weeks... And now...Here he was... The boy she loved was actually doing to her what he knew she feared the most...He was hurting her... Both physically and emotionally... The way her relatives did... She thought he, among all, would understand...

But no...She thought wrong... AJ felt a single tear fall down from her eyes and cascade gently down her cheek but she didn't care, searching into Draco's dead eyes for the gentle boy she saw that night when he had woken her up from her coma.

She couldn't see it... She saw only one of Slytherin's most ruthless leaders... The boy she had known she should have never fallen in love with from the start but she did...Regardless of what she knew he was capable of...She did love him...And she hated herself because she did...

"*Visssssio!*"A loud hiss erupted out of nowhere and both Draco and AJ turned to see a darkly glaring Harry slowly walking over to them, shoving his wand back inside his robes. Instantly, the eerie shadow wrapping around Ron's vision disappeared and he blinked to see Harry smirking at him, looking half-amused, half-almost apologetic.

"What was that? What spell was that?" Ron asked, his curiosity getting the better of him as he stood there, glaring at the Slytherin duo while AJ gave him a remorseful look of apology.

"Parseltongue defense spell... Blinds an opponent during battle... Not that many use it now since it's called *Parselmagic*...One of the darkest kinds of magic around..." Harry answered flippantly as he finally joined them.

"Then why does *he* know it?" AJ asked icily, watching as Draco glared darkly at the floor, refusing to meet her tearful gaze.

"Been training remember? Snape's been teaching us all sorts of duel spells...And you don't *always* have to be a Parselmouth to use some forms of Parselmagic... Some...*select*...gifted wizards may still have the power to use *some* given spells...." Harry whispered, making sure Ron couldn't hear them before turning back to the Gryffindor.

"Weasley, I see you and Drac here have been getting along just fine...Anything I might have missed?" He asked sarcastically, looking back and forth between the two from Ron's indignant, angry face to Draco's dark deathly one aimed at him.

"Leave it alone, Potter. Your best friend's a complete, insecure moron who doesn't know how to take care of a good woman...The same way *you* don't." Ron snapped icily, giving Harry and Draco a disgusted sneer.

"You deserve better, *AJ*..." He added softly, causing Draco to tense up again as he gave the Slytherin girl next to him a meaningful gaze. Then, giving AJ one last smile to show he wasn't angry, he stalked off, leaving the three Slytherins in silence.

"Alright, what the *fuck* just happened? Draco, why are you using Parselmagic in the corridors? Do you know what could happen if you had gotten caught by McGonagall or Filch?" Harry asked slowly, raising an eyebrow at Draco's seething figure.

"Ask your cheating whore of a sister..." He hissed, snapping his head back to level a shocked AJ with a piercing glare as she gasped at the insult.

Harry felt his hands clench into fists at the insult. "Now hold on a minute here, Draco...Just what exactly happened—"

"Ask that pathetic slut how she's using me but really wants to be with Weasley! No one has ever cheated on me before, *no one!*" Draco exploded again, interrupting Harry's words.

AJ gasped again, this time stepping forward and misty, vengeful eyes towards him. "A slut?! Is that what you think of me?! A *slut*?! Draco, I never cheated on you but you can't go around claiming that you fucking *own* me!" She screamed back at him, the tears now falling down her face and her voice trembling as she spoke.

"I *do* own you, Potter! You belong to *me* and the sooner you get that, the better! I'll handle you any fucking way I want you stupid bitch because you are *mine*! No one else's! You get that?!" He shouted furiously, ignoring Harry's flashing green eyes.

"Draco, you good-for-nothing insensitive jerk! I—"

"Look! I don't want to talk about this right now, dammit! I don't even want to look at you right now, you disgust me! Just...Just go away...Just *leave*! We'll handle this some other time." Draco said coldly and dismissively, turning away.

AJ opened her mouth to respond. "Draco, *please*—"

"Leave us." Came the harsh reply...The harsh *order*...Oh AJ got it now... He wasn't merely talking to her as her friend or as the boy she loved...He was talking to her as her Slytherin leader and she knew he expected her to obey...He was dismissing her away like a common whore...

Then, as though to prove his point, he reached forward and yanked her towards him, crashing their lips violently together in an aggressive kiss that almost made Harry lunge at them to pull them apart if Draco hadn't broken the kiss as fast as he had initiated it, shoving her away.

AJ didn't know what to say anymore...Instead, she did the only thing she could do. She raised a single hand and slapped him hard right across the cheek, her green eyes filled with both rage and pride that she gave Harry the impression of a wounded heroine for a minute.

Then, with her gaze steady and her eyes burning indignantly with tears, she calmly turned around and walked away towards the Slytherin common room, holding her head up high as she could possible muster as she did so.

Draco stared after her back in heated silence, the harsh reality of what he had said and done finally sinking into him... If anything, the accusing, absolute *fury* he saw in Harry's eyes only made it worse... Draco had hurt his sister... He had entrusted AJ to him and already he had hurt her...Maybe Weasley was right...He didn't know how to take care of a good woman...He didn't know how to because he wasn't used to it...*Never was...*

He was, if anything, a Malfoy *and* a Slytherin. So what if AJ meant the entire world to him and he didn't know what he would do without her? He wasn't going to flaunt his weakness like Harry did... He would show them that a Slytherin can still retain his indifference even through such a strong emotion as love...As much as it hurt him...

He would only remove his mask for her...AJ...The girl he loved...the girl he just could not live without...The girl whom...Draco had to hide the oncoming wave of emotions that were bubbling inside him. The pure, innocent girl he had just degraded so dismissively...The girl he hurt...

"Malfoy, I have half a mind to punch you right now for what you just said to my sister." Harry said calmly, his face a cold mask of resentment as he watched Draco brooding in front of him.

"Why don't you then?" Draco whispered weakly, leaning against the wall and burying his face into his hands, not wanting to see the glare Harry was giving him.

"I don't understand you, Malfoy...Knowing you so damn well, I know my sister means the world to you...Why the *fuck* would you do that?!" Harry hissed, his face slowly turning a seething red as he tried to prevent himself from punching his so-called best right in the face.

"She was...I... *Weasley*...I saw her with Weasley...I guess I blew up..." Draco muttered, shaking his head in dismay as Harry only

snorted and stepped up to him, making sure Draco could see the dangerous gleaming in his eyes.

"Well then, before you blow up again next time...A word of advice, Draco...If you hurt her...In *any* way possible, I am telling you... I won't let you walk away without being castrated...Even if you are my best friend. I gave her to you because I trust you to take care of her and love her the way I do...Don't you dare mess that up." Harry whispered poisonously, giving Draco a sneer to show just how serious he was.

Draco only managed to return the look weakly before Harry finally turned and stormed off in heated silence, leaving Draco to stare after him in his bitterness and frustration alone in the long dark hallway...

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*"Professor Moody!"*

Draco grunted in irritation and ran after the dark-haired Slytherin in front of him, rudely shoving away any students they passed by in the long narrow corridor as they made their way to the DADA professor.

"Professor Moody!" Harry called again, this time shoving another student out of the way before finally making it to where the said professor stood waiting for them, his normal eye fixed on Draco while his magical eye whirled on Harry.

"What is it Potter? Should you be getting to class right about now?" He asked gruffly, raising a curious eyebrow as Draco finally reached them, panting for breath.

"Did you find him? Mr. Crouch I mean...Did you find him that night?" He asked instantly, keeping his face grim as he glared at the older man for specific answers.

Moody's normal eye flashed suspiciously just before he pulled out his hip flask from his pocket and took a long swig, ignoring the disgusted grimace on Draco's face as he did. "No...I *didn't*...And neither did Severus..." He answered, shaking his head in dismay.

"But...Why not? You have my map right? Couldn't you have used it?" Harry demanded irritably, his eyes narrowing at the other man as he spoke.

"Of course I did, Potter. I took a page from your book by summoning it from my office to the forest. No trace of him anywhere on the grounds." He explained calmly, keeping an eye on both Slytherins warily.

"That's odd...It's not like he can disapparate right? Hogwarts has magical barriers for that." Draco pointed out as-a-matter-of-factly, looking highly disbelieving of Moody's answer.

Moody didn't flinch however as he trained *both* eyes now on the blonde, a smirk crossing his lips. "You ever think of being an Auror, Malfoy? Unlike your foolish father, you definitely have the mind for it." He commented, causing Draco to flush in anger at the insult implied at his dad.

Before he could snap back a witty reply however, Harry spoke up again, giving Draco an icy glare to keep him silent. "Do you think someone *made* him leave? Someone *here*...at Hogwarts?" He asked in a silent whisper, making sure Moody met his dark gaze.

The man easily looked back at the Slytherin, giving him a dark sneer. "Well we can't rule out kidnap...We know one thing though...He could be anywhere...But he's definitely not here." He said flatly, yawning as he spoke.

Draco gave a rude smirk. "Well we obviously figured *that* little bit of information already without your help, *Professor*." He drawled sarcastically, looking somewhat annoyed.

Moody only laughed harshly, nodding in reply. "So much like Lucius, aren't you? All I can say is, you two can stop playing 'private investigators' now, alright? The Ministry is already handling Crouch's search party. You'd do well to focus on the Third task, Potter..." He told them, giving Harry a meaningful look.

"And *you*, Malfoy...You be sure to help him with it. Should be right up your alley though, right boys? I mean, after all...What's a few simple



defense spells to dark magic right?" He added in a low hiss, making sure no one else heard what he said.

Draco and Harry looked warily at each other before smirking back calmly at the man, looking unaffected by his accusation. "We don't know what you're talking about, Moody." Harry answered back evenly, giving Moody a disarming grin.

Moody's eyes narrowed even more as he shook his head and took a long swig from his hip flask again before answering. "Oh I think you do, Potter...I'm not stupid you know...You two be sure to watch your back...I know for a fact about the kind of *training* you've been going through lately...If you ask me, it all looks pretty suspicious...Especially with the crowd you're training *with*, Potter..." He added, throwing a menacing sneer at Draco.

Draco paled slightly but didn't give into the threat, merely blinking in response while Harry only raised his eyebrow, unimpressed. "You just be sure to watch your back then...Both of you... I'll be watching...Keep your nose clean...And don't let me catch you boys doing anything I *know* you'd be doing..." He threatened slowly in a dangerously evil hiss that caused a shiver to run down Harry's spine.

At the boys' tense, resentful silence, the man chuckled again and sauntered off, leaving the Slytherin duo staring at each other in the middle of the crowded hallway. It took several blinking and speechless staring before Draco finally spoke up, regaining his composure.

"Do you think he knows, Potter? I mean...Do you think he's suspicious of us?" He asked calmly although the slight wavering of his voice betrayed the cool exterior that was found in his silver eyes.

Harry blinked again and shook his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose before he answered. "I don't know, Draco...The man's a bloody lunatic, who knows what he could be talking about?" He pointed out, earning an amused round of laughter from Draco.

Draco opened his mouth to respond when Harry suddenly looked up over his head, causing him to whirl around and instantly see Hedwig making her way over to them from the Owlery, her beautiful snowy

form catching the adoring looks of some of the female population in the corridor.

Harry smirked and reached out an arm for Hedwig to land on, gently stroking the loyal creature for a couple of moments before he relieved her of the burden on her leg. "It's a letter from Padfoot..." Harry said in a low whisper, looking around to make sure no one was watching them before he opened it.

Draco nodded and reached over to give Hedwig an owl treat he had in his pocket, listening intently as Harry read the words in a quiet murmur to him.

*Harry— Are you bloody crazy walking into the forest with Viktor Krum of all people?! You could have been killed for Merlin's sake! From this day forth, you had better keep those 'brave' moments to yourself because Merlin knows you are NO Gryffindor anyway. Do NOT go walking into the forest with ANYONE at night, understand?! Listen to me...Something dangerous is there at Hogwarts. I know it because I can feel it. Someone wanted to keep Crouch from seeing Dumbledore that night and knowing that you were probably a couple of feet away from him gives me the chills...You could have been bloody killed!*

*Someone put your name in that Goblet for a reason, I'm sure of it. Stay close to Draco and make sure you keep an extra watch over your sister okay? Don't go off trusting your other Slytherin buddies too...I know all about 'Slytherin loyalty' and all that but I'm a Gryffindor and I for one, do NOT trust any of those other students . They could be spies for all we know, just be on alert. Do NOT leave your dorm at night and practice well on all those training sessions Snape's giving you. Make sure you brush up on Dueling tactics too...You never know. Forget about Crouch for now, it's not about him anymore. Just watch over yourselves now. I'm counting on you.—Sirius*

"Who the *fuck* is he to begin lecturing me on all this when *he* was one of the most notorious boys in school at his age?!" Harry exploded, glaring angrily at the letter as he shoved it into his pocket.

"Harry, he made excellent points. You'd do well to listen to what he says. He's just saying you should be careful." Draco stated calmly, giving Hedwig one last gentle stroke before she flew off back to the Owlery.

"I *know* that but so far, there haven't been *any* attacks on me except for Durmstrang right?! And that was because of some fucked-up girl's bloody insecurity issues!" Harry pointed out irritably, rolling his eyes.

"You're right. There have been *no* attacks...yet. I'm pretty sure whoever put your name in the Goblet of Fire is willing to put that move to good use this last final task, Potter." Draco countered wryly, smirking at him.

"Alright, Mr. Genius, let's say someone *is* trying to kill me right now... *Here*, at Hogwarts...Then answer— *Why* didn't he kill me that night with Krum then? Huh? He could have done it right then and there but he didn't." Harry said sarcastically, leaning against the wall in exasperation.

"The answer is bloody obvious, idiot. The mastermind didn't kill you because then, it would expose him easily if he did. The third task is his best opportunity to dispose of your ass...Because then, he could make it look like a sodding accident." Draco answered in a superior tone, the smirk never leaving his face.

Harry felt a strong surge of irritation at the haughtiness in his best friend's voice. "He could have made it look like Krum and I had a duel that night right? Why—"

"Potter, I haven't got time to discuss other possible ways of your dramatic murder right now alright? Look, I don't understand it either...Just take *my* advice this time okay? *Follow what Sirius said.* That's all there is to it." Draco interrupted in annoyance, his silver eyes flashing.

At Harry's silence, Draco fought back another smirk, knowing Harry wasn't in the proper mood to be berated on right now...Especially with what he had seen between him and AJ that night...He was still pissed at Draco, he could see that but he didn't want to let Draco and AJ's problems interfere with their friendship.

That was probably one of the reasons why he had been so reluctant for Draco and AJ to start dating in the first place...Some of the couple's problems was surely going to be pushing him in between the two of them and he would rather *not* meddle in such things when he had his own damn problems already.

Finally, after a long moment of silence, Draco sighed and slicked his hand over his perfectly gelled hair before checking his watch. "Hey, what's your next class?" He asked, glancing to see a slightly distracted Harry give some passing Slytherin seventh years a high five as they passed by them in the corridors.

"Divination. Bloody waste of time too...What's yours?" He answered back easily, finally smirking once more as Draco held up a thick, hardbound Arithmancy book.

"Three guesses, Potter. Anyway, I better be going, class starts in ten minutes and I don't want to be late, they're just about starting on Quantum Calculations now..." Draco said, nodding in acknowledgement before he turned the opposite corridor.

"Yeah, catch you later Drac." Harry replied as he turned the other corridor as well, lazily making his way to their Divination classroom in a pace that obviously spoke well enough of exactly *how* excited he was of the class.

Then, seeing the sweltering weather outside the castle, he couldn't help but let out a loud groan at the thought of being in Trelawney's classroom that day. With the help of the weather, the old bat's annoyingly scented and stuffy classroom and his own damn problems badgering his mind, he would definitely *not* be in a good mood. He only hoped his classmates wouldn't bother him during class time and get the hint.

As soon as he got to the North Tower, he paused, almost settling himself right next to Blaise Zabini when he sighed and relented, sitting down right in between Crabbe and Goyle, who were in turn, in front of Lila Perrine and Theodore Nott at the very back of the room.

"Morning, Potter." Nott greeted just as Crabbe and Goyle also nodded a greeting, which Harry chose to answer with a rude grunt of

irritation, instantly letting them know that he did not want to be disturbed.

"Something wrong, Harry?" Lila asked sweetly, gently placing a perfectly-manicured hand onto Harry's firm back but at Harry's cold flinch, she pulled back immediately, knowing right away that she had almost crossed the line.

"I'm fine." Came the harsh, cool reply as Harry turned to regard them with cool, scarily calm emerald green eyes that were filled with held-back aggravation, causing all of them to wince in slight nervousness. He was *not* in a good mood.

Blaise seemed to be the only one who was not bothering him but it looked as though the Slytherin had problems of his own, his gray eyes slightly glazed over in deep thought as he kept his gaze firmly focused on his hands.

*Wonder what's wrong with him...* Harry thought for a brief moment before he shrugged and promptly chose to bury his head sleepily into his hands as some of the other students joined them.

It was after several moments that the already steaming Divinations classroom was filled with fourth year students bustling to get ready that Prof. Trelawney finally walked in with her usual slow pace, boring the hell out of the Slytherins in the back.

"Good day my dears...Please prepare yourselves...We shall be starting with Planetary Divination today...An interesting topic too I might add..." She said softly, purposely ignoring the loud sniggers emitting from Nott, Crabbe and Goyle across the room.

Lavender Brown, who was avidly listening and taking note of every word the Professor was saying, looked back and gave them a miffed glare before flipping her hair over her shoulder dismissively.

Nott nudged Harry and flashed him a smirk when the raven-haired boy looked up to see Parvati Patil seated next to a group of her Ravenclaw friends in front of them, her intense gaze surprisingly focused on *not* Harry or his group anymore but none other than Blaise Zabini.

"What the hell—" Harry was all managed to say in amusement while Nott laughed again, running a casual hand down his midnight locks as the faint amount of light in the room slightly illuminated the dark blue-black strands, causing some of the girls in the room to give a small sigh. Harry smirked at this, shaking his head. *Girls...* He thought, snorting.

"Yeah...I know...Sick huh? Seems Patil has it in for Slytherins guys somehow...Talk about Gryffindor dreaming..." Lila piped in snidely as she heard them, throwing the Gryffindor girl a sneer as Parvati promptly dropped her gaze in what she thought was a coy manner when Blaise met her eye across the room.

"I wouldn't put it past her... But she's in for a losing streak...Zabini's pretty hooked onto that bloody Hufflepuff anyway." Harry told her, giving Lila a sly grin, causing her to giggle.

"Oh...I'm not so sure about that...*Anymore...*" Lila whispered under her breath, looking over to give Millicent a secret wink over Harry's shoulder. The other Slytherins however, caught the look and smirked, knowing what the girl had in mind in the disappointed look on Blaise's face that morning had anything to do with it.

"*Everyone*, pay attention." Prof. Trelawney easily cut in, walking up to their whispering group as the Slytherins finally looked up and became aware of the stares that were being directed on them by every other student in the class.

Harry only chuckled and turned away as his housemates could only nod in embarrassment, glaring at every possible student that dared to stare at them. The class continued on in silence after that as only occasional whispers and the scratching of their quills against parchment could be heard.

Harry groaned inwardly to himself as he raised a hand and wiped the trickle of sweat that was beginning to fall down the side of his face, wishing now more than ever that he was in the Slytherin Pool House with Hermione, relaxed in the warmth of her arms and away from this miserable bat of a teacher.

The room was beginning to become unbearable now as Prof. Trelawney continued to drone on and on about Planetary alignment and Mars for some reason, nearly causing Harry to fall asleep right then and there. He waited until she had turned her back on them for a moment before he stood up and casually opened the window beside him, sighing in relief when he felt the cool air hit his face.

"My dears... Today, I believe, is an exquisite chance to observe the effects of Mars for I do believe he is placed rather interestingly at present... Now, all of you look this way please, I shall dim the lights for just a moment..." Her voice trailed off as she lifted her wand, immediately plunging the room into darkness.

Harry yawned loudly as she bent down and lifted a miniature model of the Solar System in a glass dome from her chair, holding it up for the class to see. The girls all stared in awe at the beautifully made planets all surrounded by their specific moons dangling in mid-air underneath the glass, listening carefully as Prof. Trelawney began to point out the so-called fascinating angle of Mars to Neptune.

Harry yawned again and merely raised an eyebrow as he felt the wave of sleep begin to wash over him, his mind barely registering what Prof. Trelawney was saying anymore as the sweet, sugary scent of Lila's perfume beside him began to drift him off to dreamland...

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*He was soaring high into the air... The wind blowing against his raven locks while strangely enough, it seemed his vision could see anything...He could even see the swirling clouds around him as he flew, as graceful as an eagle, off into the unknown...*

*A house stood somewhere off in the horizon...No, not a house...A mansion...A castle...A palace...The place was huge... He found that he could try soaring around it and he would find himself seeing new structures every time he did...*

*Lower and lower, he began soaring off towards the ground, still unsure of exactly how or why he was able to fly with such natural*

*grace like that of a bird's... Slightly closer to the rich green grass of the ground, he peered inside one of the mansion's large windows...*

*There was a man... A tall, generously built man who was about somewhere in his fifties...He was currently seated on a glossy, firm study table, his face completely hidden in the darkness... Harry could see from his hands—a long narrow silver cane with the crest of a serpent...A beautiful emblem of a serpent wrapped up around a long sword...It was suspiciously familiar...*

*Oh how he wanted to go inside...How he wanted to see the man's face...How he wanted to see the man's elegant exterior up close...He couldn't see him in the darkness...He couldn't see him from here...*

*Then, suddenly, as though he had heard him, the man looked up and gave him a small smile...A small smile of welcome... And beckoned for him to go inside...Intense emerald green eyes exactly as his own stared back at him, piercing right through his soul...The man gave him a small nod, the gesture surprisingly comforting in a way...He couldn't hold his excitement any longer... He wanted to go in...He wanted to be... To be home...*

*However, as soon as he had soared his way to the main entrance of the house, the entire mansion disappeared...The house, the beautiful palace had melted away and in its place, a dark, looming two-story house stood...Unwelcoming and uninviting with its dark shadowy atmosphere and broken, boarded-up doors and windows...*

*He didn't want to go in there...He didn't want to see what was behind that darkness...Those shadows...But he did... He flew silently and gracefully through those long, dark and gloomy passageways...Flew until he reached the very room at the end...*

*He did not want to be here... He wanted to leave right then but he found that he couldn't... He was somehow compelled to stay...To see what happens in this dark room...With its windows boarded up and the dim candles barely illuminating the figures he could make out...*

*There was a chair in the room...A chair with its back facing him while two figures lay, huddled beside it...One...A large snake...The other,*



*a short bald man who was currently wheezing and sobbing on the floor...*

*"You are lucky that our servant is very proficient in his task, Wormtail... He is dead now... Be thankful for it...Otherwise...You know the consequences for failure and carelessness..." A low voice hissed from the chair, the sound eerily sending a tremor of suspicion to run down Harry's spine...*

*"I am so sorry my lord! Please forgive me!!" The man on the floor pleaded pathetically, turning watery eyes up to the figure looming over him, completely hidden by the high arm chair...*

*The other figure ignored him... Turning to address the hissing snake beside him... "You, however, my dear Nagini...Are out of luck... It seems I will not be feeding Wormtail to you after all...But not to worry, I will give you a much more delectable meal instead... The meal of young, teenage flesh..." He hissed again, this time a harsh chuckle escaping his lips and echoing throughout the room.*

*The snake seemed to be delighted at the words, edging itself closer to the figure on the armchair while another figure stepped out of the shadows, allowing Harry to see the dark hooded figure of a man watching them...*

*"Indeed...Master... I promise you... I will not fail you... I will make sure that everything goes according to plan." The figure said in a callous whisper, causing the figure in the armchair to give an indignant hiss in response.*

*"It had better... Or I shall be after you...Little one... You have failed me enough times already...It was only fortunate for you that you have disposed of that wretched fool before it was too late..." Came the cold response, causing the figure to wince slightly before speaking up.*

*"I assure you master... Everything will go according to plan... I shall bring you the Potter children soon... You will have their blood...And our dear friend will never have the chance to ever meet his beloved—"*

*"SILENCE!" The figure in the chair suddenly shouted, causing both men to jump in surprise at the anger and hostile panic they found in his voice.*

*"Of course...Forgive me, my lord...I'm sorry..." The hooded man suddenly said, bowing his head and kneeling onto the floor in remorse as the enraged creature fought to regain his senses.*

*"Haven't I warned all of you enough to never speak of the forbidden?! She... They were a mistake! They do not deserve the kind of life that was supposed to be for them! They never did! And after the Third Task, I will make sure they never have any life at all..." The figure finally whispered loudly, an evil tone of malice laced into his laughter.*

*"Yes, my lord...They will never find out...Dumbledore... The old fool...He's still hushed up about it until now...Even Snape...And the others...They shall never know...Never..." He assured, keeping his gaze on the ground.*

*There was no answer to this, as only the soft sobs and wheezing gasps of the bald man on the floor were heard for a long time before the figure in the armchair finally spoke up again, this time a lot calmer than before.*

*"Well then Wormtail...It seems you need one last reminder of how much I do not tolerate failure..." He started calmly, his voice strangely dripping with sadistic amusement.*

*"My lord...please...I beg of you...." The bald man whispered, trying to cower away but the hooded figure held onto him tightly, hurling him back onto the floor in front of the hissing figure.*

*"Crucio!"*

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*Pain...* That was the first thing that had registered onto Harry's mind as the anguished screams of Wormtail echoed in his head, strangely mingling with a sound that sounded very much like his own scream of pain at the blinding, searing ache in his scar...

No... He couldn't scream... No... That was weakness... Even though every single muscle in his body felt as though it were on fire, he did not want to scream... Voldemort would hear him... He would hear his screams of pain and suffering and he would laugh at his weakness...At his frailty... No...

Wormtail...Voldemort...The third task... He had heard it all...And he had witnessed Voldemort torture Wormtail for his *failure*...Failure in what exactly? For Crouch nearly talking to Dumbledore...? And what were they talking about just now...? What mistake? What didn't they know? He was just so damn confused! Questions...Questions... All these questions started bombarding his mind and he just didn't know what else to do except scream...

He could still hear Wormtail...His loud screams and sobs echoing through the silent night as he felt his body experiencing a pain unlike any other... That was the only thing registering in his head...*Pain...Pain...Pain...Pain...*

"Harry! Harry, wake up!!!"

With one loud gasp, Harry finally forced his wrenched eyes open, fully aware of the hand he now had clutching at his scar and the many worried and fearful faces of his fellow housemates circled around him in a protective gesture of concern and privacy.

He was lying on the floor of the Divinations classroom, his entire form all sweaty and trembling while his hand still clutched tightly at his throbbing scar. His eyes were watering and blurring the vision around him as he struggled to right himself up, purposely ignoring the curious stares he was receiving from the entire class now crowded around him and trying to peer through the circle of Slytherins protecting him.

"Harry! What's wrong? What happened?!" Blaise Zabini asked him, who was surprisingly amongst the Slytherin circle, the feud he had with them momentarily forgotten at the thought of Harry in trouble.

Harry shook his head and glanced around all their faces, remembering Sirius' words about an hour ago... *'Don't go off trusting your other Slytherin buddies...They could be spies...'*

"N-nothing, I'm fine." He snapped back weakly, trying to shove them away from him as he struggled to get back onto his feet, not wanting to meet the inquiring gaze they were all giving him.

Sirius was right...Although he knew that he could trust Draco and the strong bond of friendship between them, he was wary of the other Slytherin friends they had... It was one of the things that brought a feeling of tension and uneasiness around them...

He wasn't sure of which side they were on since most of them had parents supporting Voldemort's side... Sure, he knew that they were different than their parents but he couldn't trust them... He knew better... These were *Slytherins*...They sided with whomever had power... And though in school, this meant both Harry and Draco...Outside Hogwarts...He didn't know where their loyalties lay...

It was strange actually...That despite the fact that Harry was Voldemort's number one nemesis, the Slytherins still pledged their loyalty to him... He would have to see...Later on...If 'Slytherin loyalty' was, in fact, prized above all other things... If Slytherin loyalty would subdue the thirst for power within them...

From what it appeared to him...All his Slytherins friends weren't actually siding with Voldemort but were rather...Siding with *him*... Oh no, not Dumbledore's side, he could assure you but *his* side...His *own* side...They seemed to pledge allegiance to *him* instead despite the allegiance of their families to the dark lord... They had their *own* different leader...He would see later on, if that still held true...

"Rubbish, Potter! You were rolling around on the floor clutching your forehead! What happened?!" Nott asked again, this time causing a spark of annoyance to erupt within him.

"*Nothing* happened, alright?! Merlin, I'm not some delicate little girl so just bugger off all of you!" Harry snapped coldly again, yanking his arm away roughly when Lila had tried to help him up and standing up himself, rudely shoving the other student away.

"Of course you're not alright, Potter! You were writhing around on the floor in *pain*! What was it?! What did you see?! A premonition?" Prof.

Trelawney suddenly quipped in excitement, pushing her way through the crowd of students to peer at Harry with sparkling eyes.

"It was *nothing*, Professor! Leave it alone!" Harry replied coldly, his eyes flat and fierce as they glared back at the woman's twinkling orbs. The rest of the class seemed to react in harsh whispers at this, causing the Slytherins to give them a sharp glare of warning.

"Come now, Harry! You were rolling around the floor, clutching at your scar and you're telling me you saw nothing?! Tell me! I *know* these things!" She urged persistently again, oblivious to Harry's flashing green eyes.

"All I'm going to tell you woman is that I'm going to the hospital wing. I have a bad headache." Harry replied bluntly, merely raising an eyebrow before moving through the crowd to get out of the room.

"Mr. Potter! Don't you understand?! You were drawn into a vision by the vibrations you felt in my room! If you stop now, you'll lose your chance of seeing much more—"

"*Look...*The only thing I want to see now is a damn headache cure...If that's okay with you." Harry interrupted sarcastically, turning back to silence her with another glare and forced smirk before he abruptly turned to leave the room, ignoring his friends calling after him.

"I'll see you all later. I promise, I'm fine." Harry assured the stunned, gaping Slytherins staring after him, causing them to nod silently in respect and turn to the scowling Professor in front of them who looked promptly like a child who just found out that Christmas was cancelled that year.

As soon as Harry had reached the main corridors, he began making his way over to Dumbledore's office in a hurried pace, knowing for sure that the old man would somehow have the answers to the questions shooting off in his brain right now.

He was going to go with what Sirius had said...Dumbledore may be a 'crackpot old fool' to Draco but he for one, knew that Dumbledore would know how to explain this to him somehow... He had to talk to

him right away and he'd be damned if he went to the hospital wing first as he had told the class...

As he made his way over to the Headmaster's office...A lot of images began flashing into his mind once more...The beautiful mansion... The slightly distorted vision of the man giving him a welcoming smile... The...The dark deserted house in which he saw Voldemort and Wormtail hiding...

It was strange...He had a vivid memory of that same place just before the school year had started as well at Privet Drive but he hadn't told AJ of what he saw...He had just brushed it off as another one of those bizarre little nightmares one had every once in a while but now...After that dream...He realized it...

That house...The dark, dusty house he had just seen was the one he had seen in his dream... He couldn't remember all parts of it now since it had been so long ago already and since he had carelessly refused to remember any specific details...All he remembered was an old man being killed... And the same hissing, harsh whispers coming from the armchair... *Voldemort*...

Harry felt his eyes narrowing in utmost hatred. He could still remember the events that had happened... He could still hear Voldemort's hissing whisper as he accused Wormtail of his failure...As he conversed with the hooded figure as well...Telling him of his plans and secrets...

He frowned, running a hand through his black hair. What was it that the hooded man was talking about that made Voldemort so tense...? And why did he need their blood? What was he planning? And more importantly, what exactly is it that Dumbledore and Snape are not telling him?!

And Crouch...From what they were saying...He's...*dead*? Harry shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't believe it...Someone was there that night...Sirius had been right after all...Someone had meant to commit murder that night when he was there and he had been lucky enough to get out just in time before anything had happened to him...At least...Until the Third Task when Voldemort's so-called plan

would come into action...What exactly was the fool planning to do? Feed him and AJ to the snake?!

*Something doesn't feel right...* Harry thought to himself as he rounded another corner, nearly bumping right into a Ravenclaw who was heading towards the other direction. Harry gave her a growl in response and she scurried off in fear, giving him room to pass through.

He sighed as he finally stopped in front of Dumbledore's office, coming face to face with the Gargoyle statue he could still remember during his previous years of coming to visit here. He smirked to himself, shaking his head...Being a regular at the Headmaster's office did have its advantages...

"Sherbet lemon?" Harry spoke up in a questioning tone, unsure if the old password would still work for the old office. The gargoyle's still lifeless eyes soon answered that question as he tried again, searching for the right magical sweet.

"Okay then...How about Pear drop? No? Licorice wand?"

Harry was starting to get ticked off as he promptly began naming off all the sweets he knew one by one in a rushed hurry. "Fizzing Whizbee... Drooble's best blowing gum...Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans...Oh bloody hell, just fucking open would you?! It's imperative I see him right now!" He spat out irritably, glaring up at the lifeless statue impatiently.

"Dammit, I said open up you big ugly wretched mongrel!" Harry exploded, harshly kicking at the statue before cursing out loud at his own foolishness, clutching his painful foot in pain.

"Damn...Where's Granger and her dozens of charms when I need her?" Harry muttered to himself, thinking momentarily of his girlfriend's well-known expertise in the field of charms and useful little magic spells.

"Chocolate Frog! Sugar Quill! Argh! Cockroach Cluster dammit!" He blurted out, his eyes suddenly widening in utter surprise when the gargoyle finally jumped to life at hearing the last item.

*Cockroach Cluster?* Harry fought back the urge to throw up, feeling his face turn an interesting shade of green that was almost as dark as the green on his Slytherin uniform.

He shook his head and stepped onto the foot of the spiral staircase, waiting impatiently as the door closed behind him and the staircase began moving upwards, bringing him to the office he had known from his past years. When the staircase finally stopped, he raised a hand to knock on the old polished Oak door but stopped immediately when he heard voices inside.

"What the—" Harry stopped and listened intently as he heard the familiar voice of the Minister of Magic inside the room, conversing in what seemed to be a very serious conversation with Dumbledore.

"Dumbledore, I just don't understand why you are trying to link Barty Crouch with Bertha Jorkins' disappearance. From what Ludo tells me, Bertha's exactly the type of girl who would somehow find a way to get herself lost! I'll admit that it is strange that we haven't found her until now but we needn't worry!" The voice said in an incredulous exclamation.

"Well then how would you explain Crouch then, Minister?" Came Moody's usual gruff growl, causing Harry's ears to perk up in interest and curiosity.

"It is quite simple, Alastor. Barty Crouch may have simply lost his mind...You've heard of his past right? He might have wandered off alone by himself or something." Fudge's voice explain again, giving a scoff.

"Well then he sure wanders fast, doesn't he Minister?" Dumbledore pointed out calmly, earning a smirk from Harry at the silence that suddenly dawned in the room.

"Well, I shall first inspect the scene of the event first...But you say it was near the Beauxbatons carriage right? You *do* know, Albus, that Madame Maxime is—"

"An excellent dancer, yes... I know. And a wonderful Headmistress at that..." Dumbledore interrupted as Fudge gave another silent



response. "Come now, Albus! I know all about your view on her thanks to Hagrid! She's probably as *harmless* Hagrid with his monster-fixations! Remember what happened last year?! Lucius *still* has it in for him for nearly killing his son!" Fudge blurted out in mild anger.

Harry barely held in a laugh as he recalled the event they was talking about. It was in their third year that a Hippogriff had attacked Draco in class and had caused an uproarious tirade in the Malfoy household...To be honest, he really didn't blame Hagrid for that incident...Draco had it coming at the time but he didn't want to dwell on that...It was one of the things that had almost put a serious rift in their friendship.

"If I recall, Cornelius, young Mister Malfoy had only gotten a few shallow cuts and bruises but it was nothing of *serious*... And as for Madame Maxime and Hagrid, my suspicions are lost." Dumbledore stated easily.

"Do you think we can end this discussion now?" Moody suddenly asked, his tone of voice sounding strangely amused mingled with impatience. Harry raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Yes, I do believe I have yet to see the grounds." Fudge agreed stiffly.

"No, it's not that Minister. It's just that the *other* Potter is at the door and wants a word with the headmaster." Moody said, causing Harry to start in surprise as the door in front of him suddenly opened and he found himself facing a baffled Cornelius Fudge, an amused Prof. Moody and a smiling Dumbledore.

*Busted...* He thought, giving the three men a grin as he stepped into the large office. Looking around with a slight flush of embarrassment, he was thoroughly surprised when he saw AJ in the room as well, the girl sitting in one of the chairs at the back with her legs swinging impatiently as she waited to be attended to.

"Er... Good day to you Headmaster...Professor...Minister..." Harry greeted them easily one by one, giving the three men a nod in turn. "Hello, Potter...Enjoy the conversation?" Moody answered back, giving the Slytherin a knowing smirk.

Harry didn't flinch, merely smirking back in return. "Hardly..." He replied, entering the beautiful, circular room. He scanned the paintings of the previous headmasters and headmistresses briefly, smirking wider as he noticed that they were all sleeping. *Seems they didn't like the conversation either...* He thought, smothering a chuckle.

"Hey Harry..." AJ greeted when she saw him, her face an obvious expression of relief when he sat himself down beside her. Harry gave her hand a comforting squeeze just before he turned to Fudge, who gave him a cheery smile in turn.

"Harry, boy! We were just talking about how you found Mr. Crouch that night...It was you wasn't it?" Fudge piped up, peering over at the twins curiously with unreadable eyes.

Harry nodded silently, not sure where he was getting at. "Yes...Though to be honest, Minister, Madame Maxime was *nowhere* in sight you know...And from *her* frame, I doubt she could have hidden from me easily." Harry pointed out smugly, smirking at Fudge's surprised face.

Dumbledore gave Harry a smile from over the Minister's shoulder, causing Harry to hide his chuckle under his hand. "I see...Well then, we were just about to go for a walk just now...If you'll excuse us...Perhaps it would be best for you and your sister to head back to class?" Fudge suggested, looking embarrassed.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but before he could utter a word, his sister spoke up beside him, immediately addressing Dumbledore in a firm tone. "I wish to speak to the Headmaster, Minister. That was the reason I excused myself from class in the first place." She spoke softly, looking at Dumbledore.

Harry watched as Dumbledore nodded and stood up, giving the two of them a searching look for a minute. "Wait for me here then, both of you...This won't take long." He agreed, giving them a small smile.

The twins nodded as the men all left the room in silence, closing the door behind them. Harry waited until he heard their footsteps become fainter in the corridors before turning to speak to his sister, who was twiddling her thumbs nervously in her lap.

"So...What are you doing here, AJ? Aren't you supposed to be in Arithmancy right now?" Harry asked although something told him that he might already know the answer to his own question.

AJ sighed and looked up to meet his eyes, her gaze slightly confused and nervous. "You're probably going to think that I'm overacting right now...But see, a couple of minutes ago my scar was throbbing like hell... And I thought I should do what Sirius told me in his letter and talk to Dumbledore about it." She explained quietly, closing her eyes in thought.

Harry shook his head and squeezed her hand again, his eyes silently roaming the room. "You thought right...My scar was hurting too, that's why I came here...But it's not just that...I saw something, AJ...I saw...I..." His voice trailed off as he looked away, not wanting to talk about what he had seen.

AJ, however, clutched at his hand tightly, forcing him to look back at her and meet her soft gaze. "What? What did you see?" She asked, searching his eyes but Harry just sighed and pulled away, standing up.

He glanced around the room, looking and observing every single thing he could to avoid AJ's curious eyes. He wanted to wait until Dumbledore got there until he started to explain his thoughts...He didn't want to have to do it all over again when Dumbledore got back.

Looking around, he saw various familiar items he had seen in his younger years...The Hogwarts Sorting Hat perched on the shelves behind Dumbledore's desk...The legendary silver sword of Salazar Slytherin he had somehow pulled out of the Hat back in his Second Year...Harry blinked at that, remembering the memory. It still irked him that he had used Salazar's own sword to bring down his own heir at the time... But he couldn't deny exactly how perfect the sword had seemed to fit in his hand...How it felt so light against his grip...

He shook the thoughts away and looked around again, finally noticing a brief shimmer of silvery light illuminate the glass case in front of him, causing him to whirl around to search for the source.

"Harry...Look, I know this is probably not the best time to talk about this but I—" AJ suddenly started but she stopped when Harry made a frantic gesture to her, causing her to blink and watch him in confusion.

"What? What is it?" She asked, fusing her eyebrows in confusion as she watched Harry slowly approach a black cabinet behind him, its doors slightly ajar as it revealed a silver substance inside.

Curious, she stood up as well and followed after him, peering over his shoulder when he opened the cabinet to reveal what was kept inside. What they saw puzzled them both... Inside was a shallow stone basin with runes and symbols carved around the edges unlike both Slytherins had ever encountered before...And from what they saw, it looked as though the silvery light they had seen had been coming from the basin's contents.

"What the..." Harry managed to say as they observed at the whitish silver substance swirl around in the basin, its surface ruffling as easily as water before separating and smoothing itself easily once again.

Harry couldn't help himself. He reached a single finger forward to prod the substance but AJ instantly slapped his finger away, giving him a reprimanding look. "Harry! We don't even know what that stuff is, you idiot!" She hissed, shoving him away.

"Well then what do you suppose we do with it, Einstein?" He pointed out sarcastically, giving her an annoyed look. "I don't know but I'll tell you what, the stupidest thing to do was to probably go and stick your finger into a substance you don't even know anything about!" She retorted, giving a derisive snort.

Harry glared back at her but clutched at her hand tightly as AJ gingerly took her wand out from her robes and began prodding the silvery liquid with it, leaning her head in close to the shimmering surface to inspect it closely. From up close, AJ saw that it was actually somewhat like transparent glass as she was able to see right through it but to her surprise, instead of seeing the bottom of the basin as expected, she saw instead an enormous room which she suspected that she was looking at through the ceiling.

"Harry...I don't understand...I—" She never got to finish her sentence. She gasped in alarm as the room suddenly gave a violent lurch around them, causing her to grasp onto Harry's arm tightly just as she felt herself being pitched forward into the basin in front of them.

Harry uttered a loud cry of surprise as AJ dragged him in after her, causing him to lunge forward head first into the basin as well but instead of hitting the stone bottom as he expected, he was perplexed to feel himself falling into icy darkness. He winced as he felt AJ's grip tightening on his arm as the two landed roughly onto a bench at the end of a large room, allowing the twins to inspect their surroundings.

The room was huge and strangely enough, unlike the basin, it was *square*...Filled with around no more than a hundred wizards and witches who all seemed to be ignoring them as though they didn't sense their sudden arrival...They were all seated against every wall by rising rows, all of which focused onto the scene in front of them.

An empty, chain-filled chair stood in the very middle of the room, causing AJ to shudder at the sight. It appeared as though all the adults in the room were waiting for something as they refrained from talking to one another, only staring straight ahead in a tense silence.

AJ gave a muffled stutter of surprise and began yanking on Harry's robes, causing her brother to give her an irritated look. "What?!" He snapped, narrowing his eyes at her. AJ only shook her head and pointed to the wizard beside him, causing the Slytherin to whirl around and nearly exclaim in shock.

"Professor Dumbledore! I...We...We didn't mean to go snooping or anything, we just—" Harry stopped his hurried whispers when AJ elbowed him, giving him a smirk. "Quit it, genius...He doesn't even hear you...Look..." She pointed out.

And she was right. Dumbledore didn't respond or move at all, ignoring the two teenagers completely as he stared straight ahead at a door in the far corner of the room, his gaze grim and serious. *He's ignoring us?* Harry thought, scratching his head in confusion as he looked into Dumbledore's serious expression.

Realization suddenly dawned on Harry as he inspected their surroundings again. If he wasn't mistaken, this was very much like the old diary of Tom Riddle he had found in his second year...It was a *memory*... They had somehow fallen through Prof. Dumbledore's memory...

Only...It couldn't have been a long ago memory...No...Harry smirked as he eyed Dumbledore again, noting the color of the old Wizard's hair. It was a recent memory...And where exactly were they?

Glancing around, it was quite easy to figure out that the room was a dungeon. Of course, being a Slytherin for so long, he was well familiar with dungeons and this was most certainly one with its cold, uninviting atmosphere and its window-less walls...

He blinked, however, when the doors to the dungeon finally opened and three figures walked into the front of the room. He felt a cold shiver run down his spine when he recognized who...or rather, *what* two of the figures were...

*Dementors*... He thought, unaware of how tight AJ was now clutching his hand as his eyes riveted onto the dark and cloaked creatures in front of them. They appeared to be dragging a man in between them, whom Harry could see looked as though he was about to faint.

The crowd watched in utter silence as the dementors placed the man onto the chained chair and glided out of the room, the door swinging shut behind them. Harry looked down onto the man sitting on the chair and could barely conceal his shock. "It's Karkaroff!" He hissed to AJ, who only managed a nod in return, her eyes completely focused on the shaking man.

The Durmstrang headmaster looked much younger than Dumbledore did although unlike now, he wasn't wearing his usual extravagant furs but was rather wearing ragged robes, which hung loosely on his shaking body. The chains on the chair slowly snaked their way up to his arms as he sat there, binding him to the contraption.

"Igor Karkaroff..."

Harry and AJ both looked to their left to see Mr. Crouch slowly standing up in the middle of the bench beside them, his form looking much younger and stronger than the last time Harry had seen him.

"You have been brought here from Azkaban with your claim of offering us present evidence. You have...important information for us then?" He asked, peering at the man in question as Karkaroff straightened himself in his chair.

"I do, sir... I wish to help the Ministry of Magic. I know that the Ministry is now on the search for the Dark Lord's supporters...I can provide names..." He said shakily, his tone of voice scared and unsure.

The audience began murmuring amongst themselves in reaction to his words, most of them looking at Karkaroff in distrust while the others were now looking at him in avid interest. "Rubbish..." A low growl next to AJ said, causing the girl to glance up and see Prof. Moody beside her, who, at this time, did not have his magical eye but *both* his normal eyes and *both* were looking at Karkaroff in mistrust.

"Crouch might let him out after all this...I say get the information out of him and throw him right back in with the dementors." He whispered loudly to Dumbledore, who in turn, gave a slight shaking of his head in assent.

"I'm afraid I do not agree with you there, Alastor...Up until now, I still feel that the Ministry is wrong to ally themselves with such suspicious creatures..." He stated in a hushed voice, turning back to watch the scene unfold.

"He-who-must-not-be-named had always worked in secret of course...He preferred that even we—or rather, *his supporters*, would do better *not* to know each other's own names...Only *he* knew of our identities..." Karkaroff spoke softly, throwing a wary gaze at Moody's growl of dislike at him.

"And yet, you still say that you have some names for us then, Karkaroff?" Mr. Crouch interrupted sternly, ignoring the loud whispers coming from the audience.

"I do indeed...Yes. Some of his important...His *main* supporters too...I saw them with my own eyes doing his bidding...His words...And so I release this information to show and to prove how much I am renouncing him and—"

"The names, please. Igor." Mr. Crouch interrupted sharply again, looking somewhat annoyed at Karkaroff's ranting.

Karkaroff nodded and took a shaky breath, his face pale as he began to list the names one by one. "Antonin Dolohov...I remember how he tortured muggles and the non-supporters of the Dark Lord...He—" He started but Mr. Crouch interrupted again, looking impatient.

"Yes, we know of Dolohov's crimes... We apprehended him yesterday shortly after you...Any others?" He asked again, his tone growing cold.

"Well there was Evan Rosier of course...He—"

"Is *dead*. He was caught after you as well only he preferred to fight back...It was inevitable that he was killed in a struggle." Crouch said in a bored tone, tapping his quill impatiently against his stacks of parchment.

"Took a bit of me with him too..." Moody muttered to Dumbledore and Harry turned around to see what he meant—the large chunk that was missing from his pointed nose.

"And yes indeed, he deserved what he got!" Karkaroff agreed, his tone and his eyes growing slightly hysterical as Harry realized that he was obviously becoming aware that none of his so-called information was going to be of any use to the Ministry.

"Any more, Igor?" Crouch asked again, a slight smirk on his face as he watched the other man fidget around nervously.

"Yes! There was Travers...The one who murdered McKinnons...And Mulciber...He specialized in using the Imperius Curse! Rookwood too! He served as a spy for the Dark Lord and passed information from the Ministry itself!" Karkaroff said hurriedly, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw the reactions of the people around him.



"Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?" Crouch asked harshly, turning to the witch sitting in front of him, who nodded and began scribbling down on her parchment.

"Indeed! He used his connections inside *and* outside the Ministry to get the information he needed!" Karkaroff blurted out, giving Crouch a frantic nod of the head as he spoke.

"Very well...Travers and Mulciber are already in our custody though...If that is all Karkaroff, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide on your—"

"No wait! Wait, I have more!" Karkaroff cried out again, his voice highly desperate as Harry could see from where he was just exactly how pale the man had become. "Snape! Severus Snape! He's a death eater, I assure you!" He exploded again, this time causing Harry to suck in a sharp intake of breath and nearly fall off his seat.

Dumbledore got to his feet, his gaze calm and confident when he spoke. "I thought I had already settled this matter before. Severus Snape was a death eater...But he rejoined our side even before Voldemort's defeat. He has put himself to great risk to be our spy." He explained thoroughly, immediately causing Harry to relax but he knew that his eyes were still somehow clouded over in unanswered questions.

"Fine...Karkaroff, you have been of assistance to us. I shall examine your case more thoroughly but for now, you will return to Azkaban..." Crouch's voice suddenly began fading as the dungeon around them began dissolving into thin air, everything swirling around into darkness around them.

When the dungeon had returned, Harry and AJ were surprised to see that they were seated on different seats now...*Closer* to Mr. Crouch this time as they noticed the different aura the room seemed to have compared to before. Around the room, Harry was able to make out a few familiar faces... A blonde witch with magenta robes—Rita Skeeter...A gaunter, much fiercer Mr. Crouch and surprisingly, as the door had opened...*Ludo Bagman*.

Harry's eyes widened when he saw the wizard in front of him, not wanting to believe that this lean, muscular man was the same annoying idiot who had been pestering him for days now about the tournament. *This* was definitely the height of Bagman's Quidditch days, *that* was for sure...

"Ludo Bagman...You have been brought here into the court in front of the Council of Magical law to answer some of the charges against you with regards to some activities of the Death eaters...We have heard the pronounced evidence against you and are about to reach verdict. Anything to add to your testimony?" Mr. Crouch began, giving Bagman a resentful look.

Harry and AJ both raised eyebrows at each other in disbelief as Harry tried to hold back a wave of laughter. *Bagman? A death eater?!* He smirked and shook his head, watching the scene unfold.

"Only the fact that I've been an idiot..." Bagman kidded lightly, offering a smile as some of the wizards and witches in the audience gave him a smile in response. *He's not kidding...* Harry thought derisively, rolling his eyes to himself.

"You had been caught passing information to Rookwood about the Ministry! You were helping Lord Voldemort's supporters by this and therefore, I suggest imprisonment in Azkaban for about—" Crouch stopped midsentence when an angry murmuring broke out in the audience, some of the wizards and witches glaring angrily at Crouch.

"Are you serious? I honestly had *no* idea! Rookwood was one of my dad's friends so I never imagined he'd be sided with You-Know-Who! Plus, he was also offering me a job in the Ministry later on after my Quidditch career..." Bagman explained earnestly over the loud murmuring, giving Crouch a sincere look.

"Fine then...Let's make it a vote." Crouch spat coldly, turning to the right-hand part of the dungeon where the jury was seated. "The jury will raise their hands...those in favor of imprisonment..."

Not one single person raised a hand at this as some of the people watching in the audience began to clap at the reaction, causing Crouch to turn a shade of purple in anger. One of the witches on the

jury stood up, giving Bagman a cheery smile. "Though it seems rather inappropriate, we would like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England during his previous Quidditch match against Turkey...Simply amazing." She said breathlessly, earning a lot of nods from the audience.

AJ felt a trickle of sweat run down the side of her face as the dungeon was suddenly filled with applause, the people around them smiling their agreement as Bagman smiled widely and got to his feet to give the room a bow. Harry nudged AJ, leaning over to whisper something in her ear as Crouch nearly exploded next to them in anger.

"What an idiot..." He muttered, smirking and rolling his eyes just as they saw the dungeon around them begin to melt away again. "We're switching from memory to memory..." AJ whispered beside him, her eyes widely focused on their constantly changing surroundings.

Harry blinked and looked up to see Mr. Crouch again and this time, Dumbledore seated beside him. The atmosphere change was startling, to say the least...Everyone in the room was now as quiet as the first trial had been but something was different about this one...

The tension was incredibly uncomfortable as every single witch or wizard seemed to shift around uneasily while waiting. It seemed to him that the silence was only broken by the occasional sobs of a woman seated beside Mr. Crouch, whom Harry could only assume was his wife. She was clutching a handkerchief tightly in her shaking hands while she glanced at the far corner of the room, waiting for the next convict to be brought in.

Harry turned to look at Crouch, seeing the man holding an edgy stance as he waited. He looked...He looked *nervous* as well as *pained*... Which was a shock to Harry seeing that he had literally been enjoying the past trials he had just witnessed. *Wonder who the next convict will be*... Harry thought idly, turning to focus his gaze on the door.

"Bring them in..." Crouch spoke softly, his voice echoing through the anticipating silence in the cold dungeon as AJ unconsciously grasped Harry's hand under the table for support, her face turning a deathly white color.

Once again, the door in the far corner opened and this time, 6 dementors entered the room, their dark forms flanked around four people Harry couldn't quite make out yet. At the sight of the four figures, some of the people in the crowd turned to look at Mr. Crouch, who kept his face straight as he watched.

AJ held onto Harry's hand tighter as the four people were strapped onto the four chairs in the room in front of them, finally being able to make out their features as they watched. One of them was a thickset man who was glaring up at Crouch with a defiant look on his face while another was a thinner, much more nervous one whose eyes kept glancing around the crowd. There was also a woman with thick and sleek dark hair and heavily hooded eyes beside them, sitting on the chair as though it was some sort of throne while beside her, was a boy who was probably in his late teens looking completely terrified.

He was trembling as he eyed them all, his straw-colored hair disheveled all over his face and his face as white as a ghost's. The woman beside Crouch gave a shaky shudder as she saw him, her sobs increasing loudly.

Crouch stood up slowly and glanced at the four of them, pure resentment and loathing etched onto his aged features. "You have all been brought here, today, to the Council of Magical Law so that we may pass judgment over you and the heinous crimes—"

"*Father!* Father, please, I beg you! Father..."

"—that you have been proven guilty of. The four of you have all been proven of the crimes— capturing an Auror— *Frank Longbottom*— and subjecting him to tremendous amounts of the Cruciatus Curse for your belief of him knowing the whereabouts of your master He-who-must-not-be-named—"

"*Father*, I swear I didn't do it! Please don't send me back to the dementors! Please!" The boy pleaded hysterically, his sobs rising above his father's voice. Harry was vaguely aware of how tight AJ's hand was clutching his now, causing him to wince in pain as he tried to loosen her grip.

"Furthermore, you are accused of also using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom's wife when your attempts on the said Auror have failed. You had been planning on restoring He-who-must-not-be-named into full power and to reestablish the era of darkness in his time. I ask the jury—"

"Mother! Mother, please help me! I swear, it wasn't me! I swear! Please, stop him Mother!" The boy pleaded further, turning to the sobbing woman beside his father who refused to meet his gaze, crying onto her handkerchief while her shoulders shook with harsh sobs.

"Are they talking about *Neville's* parents?" AJ asked Harry, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck rise up at the horrible revelation. Harry could only shrug back in response, his eyes never leaving the scene in front of them.

"I ask the jury to raise their hands if they believe as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban." Crouch continued on firmly, ignoring his son's loud, hysterical pleas. The witches and wizards standing in the jury all raised their hands in unison while the audience began to clap in agreement as they had done for Bagman with savage looks of triumph on their faces.

"Mother no! Don't send me back in there! Please!" The boy screamed as the dementors began to glide back into the room. The other three rose from their seats while the dark-haired woman turned wild, maniacal eyes to Crouch, an evil sneer on her face as she spoke. "The Dark Lord *will* rise again, Crouch! We will wait for him! Azkaban will not keep us from being his faithful followers! He will reward us greatly for our loyalty!" She shouted, laughing hysterically as she did.

The boy began struggling with the dementors, looking up at his father with tear-filled eyes just as the crowd jeered at him, looking horribly amused at what they were seeing. "I'm your son!" He screamed, slowly weakening at the dementors' powers.

"You are no son of mine! From this moment on, I have no son!" Crouch bellowed back, his eyes flashing in pure hatred and humiliation. AJ felt her eyes clouding over in tears as she watched

the witch beside AJ promptly turn cold and faint at her husband's words.

"Take them away! Get them out of my sight!" Crouch barked at the dementors, failing to notice his wife's condition as he turned away from the sight of his son.

Harry and AJ both watched in utter silence as the boy continued to plead with his father, his loud cries filling the cold dungeon as the dementors promptly dragged the four convicts away one by one...It wasn't until a voice finally spoke up from beside them that the two finally remembered what they came out there to do in the first place.

"I believe it is time to return to my office now, you two..." Came a soft whisper from beside them, causing both Slytherins to jump in surprise when they saw another Albus Dumbledore looking right at them, his eyes looking weary as he offered a small smile.

"Come." He said as he gently placed a hand on Harry's elbow. Harry could only nod and do the same to his sister until he felt himself rising into the air, the dungeon around him finally fading into blackness. Then, after a long, slowed somersault in mid-air, he found himself back on his feet in Dumbledore's circular office with his sister beside him.

Looking up, he saw Dumbledore in front of them, immediately causing his sister to go off into a rant of apology. "Professor Dumbledore! We swear, we didn't mean to intrude or anything but it was just open and we—"

"Do not worry Ms. Potter...I understand of course." Dumbledore said, giving her a small smile before he gently lifted the stone basin and carried it over to his desk, setting it down onto the polished surface. He motioned for the two of them to sit down before he sat down himself, allowing the twins to gaze into the basin once more.

"What is this, professor? I've never seen anything like it before..." Harry asked shakily. "It is a *Pensieve*, Harry. Sometimes...As we all do...I feel as though I have way too much memories and thoughts crammed into my mind...And I use this Pensieve to relieve myself of these excess thoughts...One can examine them at leisure and I'm

sure, as you've noticed, it becomes easier to observe events..." Dumbledore explained, indicating the basin.

"You mean...That silvery substance...They're your thoughts?" AJ asked curiously, her eyes widening as she peered into the basin again in utter astonishment. Dumbledore nodded, giving her a gentle smile. "Of course... Allow me to show you." He carefully placed the tip of his wand into his hair near the temple. As soon as he had drawn it back, the same silvery substance seemed to be sticking to it which Dumbledore promptly added to the basin.

Harry watched in amazement as his own face stared up at him from the silvery liquid before disappearing when Dumbledore swirled the substance around, reappearing as none other than Snape who opened his mouth to say something out loud.

"It's coming back...Karkaroff showed me his as well...Stronger and clearer than ever...*He* is coming for them...He is coming for their blood...For it is only theirs that can restore him...It is all coming back now, Albus... We cannot keep hiding the truth from them forever...We cannot avoid the inevitable."

"I was simply using the Pensieve when Fudge had arrived and if I recall...I was not able to fasten the cabinet door properly...It's perfectly understandable you two would stumble onto it." Dumbledore interrupted briskly, nodding his assent as AJ colored in embarrassment. Dumbledore noticed this but said nothing, inwardly delighted at AJ's developing behavior.

"Curiosity is not a sin, Ms. Potter...You need not be embarrassed." He said as he slowly added another thought into the swirling basin, this time the substance swirling around to reveal a witch of about sixteen who was scowling as she spoke.

Dumbledore watched her with a grim expression, his eyes a mixture of sadness and regret. "Dear Bertha.... A very curious witch herself..." He murmured, sighing heavily to himself. "Bertha Jorkins, Professor?" AJ asked him, her eyes riveting back to the girl in the Pensieve.

"Yes...That was her when I remembered her back in school...Quite a girl to pry herself, Bertha..." Dumbledore answered, sighing as he swirled the basin again, easily coaxing the liquid back into a calm silver.

Harry watched, completely silent as the silver light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore's aged face, making the man appear much older than Harry had ever thought him to be.

"So...Harry...Before you and your sister wander off into *my* thoughts again...And quite literally in fact...I take it that you both have something important to talk to me about?" He suddenly asked, his blue eyes coming to rest on the two Slytherins in front of him.

Harry and AJ met each other's gaze briefly, their eyes searching for a signal from the other's before Harry finally spoke up first, breaking the silence. "Er...Yes, professor... We did. Um...See, it seems AJ and I both felt a painful stinging in our scars at the same time just now...I believe hers was spontaneous while I had mine during a dream...I er...I had fallen asleep in Divinations..." Harry started warily, giving Dumbledore a sheepish look.

The old wizard merely nodded for him to continue, giving him an amused look. "Anyway... I had a dream...A rather strange dream in fact... It felt as though I was actually there...Like it was really happening and I was there to witness it..." Harry continued, biting his lip in thought. Dumbledore and AJ both nodded, both sets of eyes focused intently on him as Harry forced himself to continue.

"Well...It started out kind of nice at first...I dreamt that I was flying...No, I was *soaring* through the air...And then I came upon this really beautiful place...I don't know where it was of course but it was a house...A large house somewhere off in the country?" Harry said, raising his eyebrows together in thought as he recalled the dream.

He didn't notice Dumbledore's suddenly pallid face as he continued on, his eyes clouded over in thought. "And then I saw a man in there...Well, I didn't really get to see the man of course...But I saw his form. His...er...*figure*... I couldn't make out anything but just before the vision had vanished, I saw that he had green eyes when



he looked at me... But that was it. He looked at me..." Harry spoke quietly, his voice dropping into a confused whisper.

AJ fused her eyebrows together as she listened to him, nodding once more as Dumbledore could only pinch the bridge of his nose in thought, his eyes meeting Harry's. "I see...Do continue then, Harry..." He urged, giving a firm nod.

Harry nodded back, taking in a deep breath of air before speaking. "There was something else too, Professor...See... This has actually been bothering me for a couple of days now...I saw...a *mark*...an *emblem*..." He started, biting his lip as he searched for Dumbledore's reaction. The man merely raised his eyebrows, his gaze urging him to carry on.

"It was etched onto a cane that the man held in his hands...It was an emblem of a serpent wrapped around a long sword..." Harry whispered, now focused intently onto Dumbledore's blue orbs. Dumbledore paled visibly again but didn't show any signs of reacting. "Quite understandable, Mr. Potter...Certain wizarding families have magical emblems as a sign of their true blood heritage." Dumbledore answered briskly.

Harry nodded but didn't look away, more than aware of AJ's confused gaze on him as he forced himself to continue. "The thing is professor...That wasn't an ordinary mark. I know...Because...Because I've seen that mark before...I've seen it so many times before and I recognize it...And I can show you right now..." Harry whispered softly, gazing into his twin's eyes before he promptly stood up and pushed his robes aside, lifting his shirt slightly to reveal what he meant to show them.

There, etched right onto the pale skin behind his shoulder stood the very same mark he had seen in his dream... A serpent coiled up around a long sword... And all AJ could do was stare and gape at it in absolute horror while Dumbledore's eyes flashed for a minute, his body stiffening in his seat.

"I want answers, Professor. I want answers now...I've been ignoring this mark for months now but after that dream... I know there's something more to it. And I'm not leaving this office until I fully

understand what it means." Harry said coldly as he slipped his shirt back on, plopping back swiftly onto his seat.

Dumbledore could do nothing but nod his agreement weakly, slowly burying his aged face into his hands before he brought himself to speak up. "Yes...Well...I figured you would, Harry. And though it surprised me to see that you have gotten that very mark, I will explain it briefly to you." He decided, taking a deep sigh before speaking.

"That Harry...As you have said...Is not an ordinary mark. It is indeed an *emblem*...An *Insignia* of a certain name that has grown quite powerful in our world. You should know Harry that it is common for some families in the Wizarding World to have certain crests or symbols for themselves and their children...The Malfoys have one, I believe... As did the Potters...But that Harry...is none other than the legendary emblem of *Salazar Slytherin's* clan himself." Dumbledore spoke slowly, keeping silent as he saw both Harry and AJ's eyes widen in alarm.

"What?! But...How is that possible, headmaster?! We couldn't have come from Slytherin's line! Our mother was even muggleborn for Merlin's sake, it is impossible!" AJ blurted out, causing Dumbledore to hold up a hand to stop her.

"Yes, I know Ms. Potter...It seems quite impossible to believe but I assure you it is true. Nearly every Wizarding family has a symbol...But it was *only* Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor themselves—Once former best friends—who chose to imprint their symbols onto their children in the most unique way possible. They had it *burned* onto their very bodies as a sign of their blood...Their heritage. Later on, as the years progressed, it became magical that the mark would appear onto their very skin..." Dumbledore explained, looking terribly grim for his age.

Harry clutched tightly at his shoulder where he knew the mark was, his green eyes focused intently on Dumbledore. "Rather bizarre wasn't it? But it was quite helpful actually...It was easier to spot a true Gryffindor or Slytherin right away after that...Or at least, those of their clan who were powerful enough to bear the legendary mark...As it only appeared on those who had the magical capacity to carry on

their family name in honor." He continued, looking lost in his own thoughts.

"But Professor...How exactly is Harry a *Slytherin*? I don't ever recall seeing that mark right there on his shoulder before until now... It just suddenly appeared out of nowhere! Are we somehow related to Slytherin?" AJ interrupted, causing Harry to look at her in realization.

Dumbledore gave her a bleak smile. "No, Ms. Potter... I am getting to that...See...Although yes, I do believe that the mark on Harry's shoulder is genuine, *you* are not of the clan..." He told her, shaking his head. At this, Harry stood up, instantly pulling AJ to her feet.

"Professor! I saw a mark on her shoulder just like it! I saw it right before the Yule Ball..." Harry suddenly quipped up, turning AJ around so he could lift the back of her shirt. He was surprised however, when he saw that the skin on her bare back was indeed, *unmarked*...No sign of trace of the same serpent mark ever being there as he had remembered...

"What the...But...Professor...I swear, I had seen the same mark on her shoulder before! It was right on the back of her shoulder, I promise!" Harry raged, glancing intently for any mark on his sister's white, flawless back. He whirled his sister around and stared at her intently, trying to get her to admit the truth in his words. "AJ...Don't you remember anything?! Don't you remember a mark somewhere on your shoulder?! Surely you must have known right?" Harry pressed again, shaking his sister by the shoulders as AJ only winced in response.

"N-No...I... I d-don't remember anything... I haven't been able to recall much ever since I fell into that coma-sleep... That's the reason I have such a bloody hard time catching up in class in the first place..." She answered honestly, meeting his disbelieving gaze.

Dumbledore sighed again and gestured for him to sit down, shaking his head repeatedly. "No...Harry, listen to me closely. Your sister does *not* have the mark of Salazar Slytherin etched onto her back...Only you do, Harry. She cannot bear the same mark." He told him, gently urging AJ to sit back down as well.

"But... *Why*? Why only me professor? We're of the same blood right? We're twins for Merlin's sake! Why doesn't she have the mark anymore?" Harry prodded, his eyes glazing with burning curiosity.

Dumbledore smiled forlornly at him, his eyes strangely glinting with a strange, unreadable emotion that made AJ doubt what he was about to tell them was actually what he meant to say. "Because it is only you whom Voldemort has passed his powers to, Harry... Don't you remember? That night...When you got that scar...It was only you whom Voldemort tried to kill...It was only you whom he unintentionally passed a bit of himself into..." He explained, tapping his fingers against the table.

Harry bit his lip as AJ gazed intently at him, her eyes resting on the scar on his forehead. "You were marked by Lord Voldemort himself Harry... You were marked by Salazar Slytherin's very own heir meaning you were *magically* given his powers...His abilities...His *heritage*...I'm sure he did not want that to happen of course...But it did...And now, Harry James Potter...You are—*magically*—a descendent of Salazar Slytherin." Dumbledore finished, waiting for the two teenagers' reaction.

The two remained silent for a minute, Harry only nodding in understanding while his eyes lit up with a strange sense of sudden self-importance before he spoke up again, looking at Dumbledore. "But wait...If that's true...Then why did the mark only appear now?" He asked, looking confused.

Dumbledore chuckled, shaking his head. "It only means that you have reached your Wizard Maturation, Harry...Such a powerful mark like that can only surface when a wizard has reached the full magical potential to actually bear its responsibility..." Dumbledore answered easily.

Harry nodded again, his form relaxing at Dumbledore's explanation as he failed to see, once again, the suspicious glance his sister was throwing at the headmaster as though she was doubtful of his words. It seemed to her that Dumbledore was leaving out a vital part of his explanation but she didn't push it further, knowing it would only confuse her brother more if she did.

"I understand now, Headmaster...But...Excuse me if I ask another question but what of my dream? I had a vision that same dream... Right after I saw that man...I saw a house...And I saw...I saw *Wormtail* with *Voldemort*...Along with a certain hooded follower of his..." Harry suddenly started again, running a hand through a tangled mane of dark hair. i

"He kept saying something about Wormtail failing and that someone was dead... Also about feeding us to a snake...*His* snake..." He shook his head, trying to block out the images. "And that's when he started to torture Wormtail with the Cruciatus Curse...That's how I woke up...My scar started burning right after that." Harry finished, looking at the older wizard for an explanation.

"I see...Is this the second time your scar hurt after that dream you had during the summer?" Dumbledore asked suddenly, causing Harry to snap his head and glare at AJ in accusation.

"How did you...I—"

"Yes, Ms. Potter here had written to me about it but I had heard of it first from your Godfather, Harry. I have been writing to him ever since he had left Hogwarts and it was my idea for him to stay in the mountainside cave at the moment." Dumbledore said hastily, drawing Harry's angry glare away from his sheepish twin.

Harry nodded stiffly though his eyes still told AJ that he was pissed off at her for telling on him. "Well...It did hurt that one time when AJ got attacked...But I didn't realize it had been a warning. Professor...Why is it that my scar just suddenly burns up? Is it some sort of signal?" Harry asked, fingering the mark on his forehead.

Dumbledore gazed at him seriously for a long moment before speaking, "I only have a theory, Harry...But I believe that your scar hurts you because it serves as a warning...When Voldemort or an evil presence is near you...And when he is feeling a strong surge of hatred." He answered.

"Then why am I affected professor? Why is it that Harry has visions when I don't?" AJ suddenly asked, breaking out of her silent stupor.

"Because...AJ...The main source of connection to Voldemort is not your scar but Harry's... It was his scar that was made directly by Voldemort's wand...His power and his hatred. Yours, I believe...is only a result of the strong twin connection you have with your brother...Or at least, that is once again...my *theory*. Your scar is only a pale shadow of Harry's...That is why it did not even take the same form...As they say, twins are one-half of the same soul... I truly believe that the reason your scar hurts is simply because Harry's does... You feel and share the pain through your twin-bond without being connected to the Dark Lord yourself..." Dumbledore easily answered, causing her to blink in surprise.

"So Voldemort has no connection to me but only to Harry?" AJ asked incredulously. Dumbledore only nodded silently in response, looking completely worn out but Harry wasn't finished yet.

"So...Professor Dumbledore...Do you think the dream really happened somehow? Was it a vision as Prof. Trelawney said?" Harry pressed on, causing AJ to eye him in disapproval but he ignored her, desperate to get some answers.

"It is possible, Harry...It is possible that it happened and that he is getting stronger, right now, as we speak...After all...The times he rose to power were also initiated with suspicious disappearances... As what is happening now...Not only Wizards but muggles as well as I recall of one muggle disappearing in the village Voldemort's father grew up...Somehow...I know these events are all linked to him..." Dumbledore murmured, gazing deeply into the Pensieve.

There was another long pregnant pause in the room again until finally, AJ spoke up, voicing out the question that had been bothering her ever since she had witnessed that court scene. "Professor...May I ask you a few questions about what we witnessed in the Pensieve? If it's alright of course..." She said, biting her lip.

At Dumbledore's nod, she braced herself, feeling all the blood rush out of her face. "Mr. Crouch...When he was convicting his own son...Was he...Was he talking about Neville Longbottom's parents?" She asked, her eyes surprisingly soft as she met the man's eyes in front of her.

"Yes, AJ...Neville's father—Frank Longbottom was an Auror like Prof. Moody...He and Neville's mother had been tortured by the death eaters for Voldemort's whereabouts until they were driven to insanity...They are in St. Mungo's right now...Neville still visits I believe but they do not recognize him..." He answered softly, his voice filled with a sense of bitterness Harry had never heard in him before.

AJ's eyes widened in alarm as all the blood rushed out of her face... *Oh Merlin...I had no idea...* She thought to herself, feeling a strong surge of guilt overwhelm her at the thought of how much the Slytherins had been tormenting Neville since their first year.

Harry however, just kept his gaze firmly focused ahead, his eyes never revealing what he thought of what Dumbledore had just told them. The old man only sighed heavily, looking slightly weary in his seat.

"They were popular before...The Longbottoms...One of the remaining Pureblood families up until now... They were attacked after Voldemort's fall of power... The Ministry was enraged and did whatever they could to apprehend right away those guilty of the crime." He continued as the two Slytherins nodded again in silence.

"Do you think Crouch's son was really involved, headmaster?" Harry asked curiously, raising an eyebrow. Dumbledore merely shook his head, gazing right back at him with a blank expression. "That, I honestly do not know, Harry." Was all he said.

"But Prof. Snape...Was he really—"

"Yes, Harry...He *was*. *Was*, meaning, *not anymore*. I assure you that you have no reason to doubt your head of house...He is no more a supporter of Voldemort than I am." Dumbledore said calmly, meeting his gaze.

Harry nodded but couldn't help ask one last question he knew had been plaguing his mind ever since the Quidditch World Cup. "And...Headmaster...Mr. Malfoy... Lucius Malfoy, I mean... He—"

"Yes, Harry. He is on our side...Though it took a lot of convincing on my part to get the Ministry to trust him again...After everything his family was known for... He has fully pledged his loyalty and has vowed a change of ways. It may seem hard for you to believe at first...Given that incident in your second year but as I recall...From his own words ... He is the only death eater who had refused to soil his hands by killing other people *directly*...*Not* an assuring statement but comforting nevertheless." Dumbledore said wryly, giving Harry a small smile which he briefly returned.

"But Prof. Dumbledore...I'm curious...How is it that he joined Voldemort in the first place? And what made him want to switch sides all of a sudden?" Harry pressed on further, not being able to prevent his curiosity from getting the better of him.

Dumbledore merely gave a small smile of understanding. "Ah yes...Well...I would appreciate it if you kept this matter confidential...Since I believe...Neither Draco *nor* his father enjoys having it brought up but...It wasn't actually Lucius himself who joined in his own behalf...It had been Draco's grandfather— *Pritchard Malfoy* who had sided with Voldemort willingly."

AJ stiffened visibly at the mention of Draco but listened closely, wanting to hear the explanation. "Pritchard...As much as Lucius may want to deny it, had been what born as something very rare in his family...He had been born into what everyone may call now as a *Squib*." Dumbledore said, not reacting as he saw the utter look of astonishment on Harry's face.

"Yes...I know...It seems surprising doesn't it? Lucius prides himself so much on his family's powerful blood that he's failed to mention such a factor but yes, it is true. I had met Pritchard myself...Quite a meek boy at first and yes, he was a squib. But that was before he had met Voldemort—then Tom Riddle of course... He had offered Pritchard the chance to gain use of his full magical powers through the use of his knowledge in the darkest of arts...But of course, there was a heavy price for such a gift." Dumbledore continued, stopping to look directly at Harry.



"The condition was that for Voldemort restoring his magic, he, along with every future offspring and descendent of the Malfoy clan, was to serve Voldemort as loyal followers for as long as their lives allowed. A heavy offer it was but of course, out of desperation, he accepted...And no one ever mentioned his magical incompetence again...No one ever *dared* question how it happened as well...Everyone had presumed it to be '*his strong magical power*' finally awakening..." Dumbledore finished, pausing to look at Harry's calculating face.

"As you already know by now, Harry... A Malfoy has never been one to break a word or a promise... And for this, Lucius had been serving Voldemort ever since as his right-hand man, not being able to break his vow of loyalty to his father. I reckon though, that the reason he wants to switch is because he does not want his son— Draco, to suffer the same fate as he did...He does not want his son to be a servant to a madman. That, I think, is the only reason he wants Voldemort defeated—So he could put an end to the burden Pritchard placed upon their family." Dumbledore added, shaking his head.

AJ could only stare at him as swirling thoughts began to cloud up her mind...She felt dizzy...Horribly dizzy with all the information that was being shoved into her brain all at once but she couldn't bring herself to stop listening, wanting to know more of what Dumbledore had to say.

"So...You both believe Voldemort will rise again then, Professor? Is that why you are preparing yourself like this? Is that why we are taking such precautions? He is coming for me you know...For me and AJ... He is going to use the Third task somehow as a way...I know he is." Harry told him, his eyes cold and heavy.

Dumbledore only stared back at him, his eyes filled with more answers that AJ knew he was not going to tell them at that time. "Yes, Harry...I think he *will*...And yes...Lucius and I have both agreed to keep his switch confidential because we both know it is only a matter of time Voldemort comes back...And he *will* come back Harry. Which is why you should both be careful..." He replied with a tone of finality in his voice that Harry and AJ both knew right away that the long talk was over.

As the twins both stood up, Dumbledore gave the two of them a serious look, his blue eyes searching deep into their emerald ones. "I would appreciate it if you two would keep the information I have passed about both Neville and Draco discreet...It is a private matter not meant to be discussed." He said, causing both Slytherins to nod.

Just as Harry was about to follow AJ out the door of the office, Dumbledore laid a hand on his shoulder, causing him to stop midway and turn around to face him. "Good luck with the Third task, Harry... Be careful... I sense something...Be very careful." Dumbledore whispered just before Harry nodded for the last time and finally walked off, closing the door behind them and failing to see the look of guilt on Dumbledore's face.

*Merlin forgive me...I have kept the real truth from these children for so long already... I only hope they won't hate me when it all comes out...*

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*"Kill the spare..."*

AJ winced in her sleep that same night and gave a heavy toss to the left, unconsciously burying her face into her pillow and clutching tightly at the pendant Harry had given her hanging from her chest.

*"CRUCIO!"*

No... AJ winced again, a soft whimper of fear escaping her as images began to flood her dreams... Horrible images... *Flashing* images of Voldemort laughing....Laughing at her as she writhed on the ground in pain... Screaming...Sobbing... Her figure bruised and bloody...

*"IMPERIO!"*

AJ tossed violently in her bed, seeking to clear the images away. Her panting, sweating form was now trembling fiercely as more painful images began to invade her mind... Those of Harry twitching lifelessly on the ground...His green eyes rolling up to the back of his head as his body went on a vehement seizure... No...Stop

*it...Please...* AJ shook her head, her hands now tightening around her pillow.

*"Kill the spare..."*

More flashes...More bright green flashes flooded her... Images again of Harry...This time bleeding and writhing on the floor as he screamed in absolute pain...Calling out for her... AJ stiffened in her sleep and tossed again, trying to will herself to wake up but the horrible images just kept on coming...

She saw briefly...What appeared to look like Cedric's form lying deathly still on the ground...His normally bright face pale and lifeless... Draco screaming as a dark cloaked figure stood over him, evil laughter heard in the darkness...Then Hermione's form bound tightly, her eyes wide with terror as she gazed up at her...

AJ face began to crumple in her sleep again as Hermione's form promptly transformed back into her brother's weak, bloody body, allowing AJ to see him looking up at the dark wizard in front of him with a stubborn determination in his face...

*"AVADA—"*

*"No!!!"* AJ screamed suddenly, finally bolting right up as her eyes instantly popped open, causing the other Slytherin girls in the room to jump in surprise at her sudden shout of terror.

"Potter...? Was that you...? What the hell are you doing screaming in the middle of the night?!" Came Lila's groggy voice from the bed beside her, causing AJ to blink and look around in shock, finally realizing where she was.

"I—I...I-It's nothing Lila...J-just had a bad dream, that's all... G-go back to sleep..." AJ managed to breath out shakily, her eyes still wide with terror as she pressed a cold, clammy hand to her rapidly rising chest, feeling her pounding heartbeat through her sweat-soaked nightgown.

"Whatever Potter...Just keep your bloody wet dreams down, for Merlin's sake..." Came Pansy's amused, sleepy voice, causing AJ to

laugh very weakly in spite of herself at the absurdity of what the girl had just said.

For some strange, sick reason...It had calmed her somehow... Though the day she'd ever admit that to the girl would be the day she would have kissed bloody Goyle of all people...

She took a deep breath again and ran a shaking hand through her damp hair, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart by breathing in large gulps of air before she dared close her eyes again, burying her face into her hands.

*A nightmare....It was a nightmare...* She assured herself, feeling her breathing slowly returning back to normal as she repeated the phrase over and over again in her head, finally coming back to her proper senses.

She sighed again and finally lifted her face up, gazing at the unwelcoming and cold darkness before her... She had never told Harry but this had always been one of the reasons why she felt that the Slytherin Dungeons were so unwelcoming... She didn't really like the cold, chilly atmosphere around her... It gave her an empty feeling of being alone...Of being uncared for...And until now, she found that she had never fully gotten used to that feeling.

She took in a deep breath of air before she finally sat up, feeling her heartbeat now back to its normal pace although the fear and trembling in her body was no doubt still there, causing her to shiver in dread yet again.

*I can't go back to sleep...Not after that...I can't stay here alone and awake like this...* AJ thought to herself, cautiously hugging herself for warmth as she slid off her large four-poster bed, wincing when she felt the cold dungeon floor touch her warm feet underneath her.

She gave an involuntary shiver and silently made her way over to her trunk, careful not to wake any of the sleeping Slytherin girls up as she rummaged around for her wand. When she had finally found the gleaming object, she quietly made her way out of the room, pulling her thin nightgown tighter over her shivering body as she closed the door behind her.

Then, biting her lip in slight rising fear, she hastily made her way down the stairs, running towards the boy's dormitories until she reached her brother's dorm, stopping to whisper a brief prayer of worry to herself before she slowly opened the door, entered into the eerie darkness.

"*Lumos...*" She whispered softly, instantly illuminating the dark room in front of her to see the large lump-covered beds scattered around. She nearly jumped in terror when she heard a loud snore coming from Crabbe's bed, causing her to roll her eyes and all but run to her brother's bed, more than willing to fall asleep in his protective embrace away from the horrible images plaguing her mind.

"Harry....Harry wake up..." She hissed softly under her breath as she gingerly pulled the emerald curtains draped over her brother's bed aside, using her wand to illuminate the surprisingly *empty* bed in front of her.

*Oh no...* She felt her heart stop beating for a split second as when she caught sight of his empty bed, immediately imagining that Harry had been abducted by the Dark Lord as she had been seeing in her nightmare but the thought quickly vanished when AJ caught sight of a small note by the edge of his bed.

Wrinkling her forehead, she reached over and picked it up, instantly feeling a strong flooding surge of jealousy as she read Harry's neatly written words. *Draco—Stayed with Hermione at the Pool Room last night. I'll meet you in the Great Hall.—Harry.*

*So...He's with Granger... At the time I need him the most right now, he's not even here to share my fears...* AJ thought for a long moment, feeling a familiar prickling sensation at the corner of her eyes at the harsh realization.

She knew she couldn't blame him...Her brother was in love and she was happy for him...It just hurt her to be reminded of the fact that he couldn't always be there for her as he always was in the past... Things couldn't go back to the way they were... He had Hermione now...He wouldn't always be there for her whenever she needed him...

*Oh stop being selfish! It's not always about you, princess!* A cruel voice hissed inside her head, causing her to flinch at herself and nod in agreement, giving a soft sigh as she collapsed onto the empty bed in front of her.

*So Harry's not here tonight...That's alright...I can handle myself now... I just wish he could stay with me for just a couple of minutes to make this fear go away...Merlin...How I miss spending time with him... I miss him so much...* AJ thought to herself, this time not preventing the tears from falling down her cheeks.

She swallowed the hurt and disappointment welling up inside her and shook her head, wiping the tears away hastily. No... Harry still loved her... He just...Couldn't be here for her right now...And she had to learn to accept that...She had to learn to accept the fact that her brother loved *two* of them now...Her *and* Hermione...And the sooner she accepted that, the sooner it would become easier to bear moments like these...

Sighing heavily, she forced her shaking form up back up, set on heading back onto her cold, unwelcoming bed but before she had realized what she was doing, she found herself heading straight for Draco's bed across from Harry's, desperate for any form of affection to get the fear off her chest.

As soon as she had pulled the covers back, she found herself staring into Draco's softly sleeping face, his eyelids fluttered shut as he almost look like the complete opposite of himself as he slept—an *angel*...

AJ swallowed the lump forming in her throat and gently shook him awake, feeling somewhat ashamed of disturbing the plain innocence of his expression. Draco murmured unintelligibly in his sleep and gave an annoyed grunt of protest, trying to snuggle back into his pillow.

"Draco..." AJ pleaded softly, jostling him awake again as Draco could only shift in response, his form twisting underneath his blanket as he struggled to get away from her prying hands.

"Draco please..." She begged again, her eyes glistening in desperation and vulnerability as she began shaking him harder, finally causing the blonde Slytherin to give an irritated growl and open his eyes, squinting up at her form in confusion.

It took him several rapid blinks and rubs of the eye to finally realize who she was, causing him to sit up instantly, his sleepy eyes going wide with surprise and concern. "AJ...What's wrong? It's the middle of the night, what are you doing here?" He asked, barely suppressing a yawn as he spoke. He rubbed at his eyes again and raked a single hand through his blond locks, disheveling the silver strands before he turned to look at the girl with disbelieving eyes again.

As far as he could remember, AJ was still currently ignoring him from what had happened between them several nights before...She had been purposely ignoring his very presence in class and with their friends all day and frankly, he was rather flabbergasted that she would be walking into his room in the middle of the night.

AJ merely gazed at him with the same imploring expression, her eyes so wide and desperate that she reminded Draco at that very moment of a young, lost little child looking for her parents. "I-I'm r-really sorry to wake you... But..." She bit her lip, unsure of what to say.

"C-can I sleep with you? Here? P-*please*?" She whispered, her eyes widening even more at him in worried anticipation as Draco's own eyes widened in surprise, not at all expecting what he had heard.

"Pardon?" Draco asked again, blinking as AJ fought to keep herself from running away again, her nervous green eyes dropping to the floor in shame. "I...I had a nightmare...I-I'm just scared I guess...And Harry isn't there...Please? Can I just sleep with you tonight? Just this once..." She begged again softly, looking back up to meet his softening gaze.

Draco watched her for a moment, noting her pale shivering form and her surprisingly childlike green eyes peering at him with a sense of desperation and trust in them that almost made his cool exterior melt. Then, with a soft smile, he gave her a brief nod and pulled the covers of his bed back, gesturing for her to climb in.

AJ blushed lightly as she caught sight of his lean chest underneath the covers, his body only wearing the same kind of velvet pajama bottoms she had seen him wearing the last time she had been in their dorm. She bit her lip as she stared at him carefully, still unsure of what he meant to indicate.

"Come on..." He urged gently, nodding as AJ instantly climbed onto the bed beside him and clung onto him tightly, burying her face into his bare chest and curling her slender body up against his own until she was sidled perfectly against him. Draco didn't say anything about her behavior but carefully covered her shivering body with the blanket, his own arms pulling her close against him.

"Shh...Just try to forget about it...It was just a dream..." He whispered soothingly into her ear as AJ trembled against him again, her hands now clutching tightly at him almost as if for fear of him pulling away.

"I-It...I...I saw so many images... S-so many horrible things, Draco... Harry...You... Voldemort..." Her voice trailed off as Draco gently began stroking her hair, leaning over to place an assuring kiss onto the wild mane of silky strands.

"You want to tell me about it?" He asked again, this time, pulling slightly away so he could peer closely into AJ's face. She gazed back at him, her eyes looking haunted and lifeless as she merely shook her head and buried her face back into his chest, refusing to talk.

Draco only sighed and wrapped his arms tighter around her, pulling the blankets tighter around their shivering bodies as he felt AJ's heartbeat against his own. He had never seen this side of AJ before... Sure... He had seen her cry a couple of times...And he had seen her rebellious side more than anything but this...Frail...This *vulnerable* AJ was just too much.... Seeing her like this almost gave him a strong urge to protect her...To protect her from everything cruel and vicious around her despite how unbecoming of his character it was...It was no wonder Harry was so overprotective of her...He could understand the feeling now.

She just seemed too fragile...So frail like this that Draco was guilty of the way he had treated her just a couple of days ago when he had



seen her with Weasley... His logical side knew that AJ had been doing nothing wrong but at that moment, he didn't seem to care about being logical, he over-all *possessive* side taking over...

That was why he had blown up at her... He wanted to make sure that Weasley *and* AJ knew whom she really belonged to... He hadn't meant for it to go that far...He hadn't meant to hurt her like that the way he did...

Draco sighed and shoved the painful memory away, more than intent on focusing his attention to comforting the shivering bundle in his arms. Hesitantly, he began rubbing small circles onto the girl's tense back, feeling a wave of relief wash over him as he felt AJ slowly beginning to melt in response.

He knew now that she only tried to be strong in front of others...But inside....She seemed exactly like what he thought...A child... A child afraid of the reality of life around her and Draco was going to make sure that she didn't have to face that alone again...

"Good night, AJ..." He whispered softly into her ear, leaning over to give the girl a tender kiss on her soft cheek, smiling to himself when he felt AJ soften slightly in response, her tense facial features relaxing at the action.

"Good night...Draco..." She whispered back, her voice barely loud enough to hear but Draco heard her, giving her another kiss on the forehead in response as the two of them promptly drifted off into another heavy sleep, both Slytherins forgetting completely about their past argument...Or erasing the so-called fight completely from their minds...

They knew that night that they had forgiven each other...And an unspoken agreement had somehow passed between them that they were never going to speak of it again... What was important now was that it was over...And that both of them were willing to forget about the single mistake.

"Love you, Potter..." Was all Draco could say before he finally fell back to sleep, his eyelids gently closing over glazed silver orbs as AJ

soon followed beside him, falling into a sleep filled with *dreams* this time...

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**A/N:** Heh...Fluff... smirk Whoa...Another long sucky chapter yet again huh? Well, hope you guys like it anyway I guess... Oh and I am so sorry but there wasn't any Harry/Herm action in this chapter, I couldn't fit it in since the chapter was pretty damn long enough as it is... Hope you liked some of the secrets I revealed in here...Actually, I revealed a LOT of stuff in here...A lot of *foreshadowing*...If I might... Hope you guys picked up the clues! Coming up— **FINALLY:** We get a glimpse of the Slytherins' third task training, Rita Skeeter's Article on Harry and of course, **THE THIRD TASK!** squeals in excitement We're almost there! Just a few more events and GoF is finished! sobs hysterically Hehe! cough excuse me... But seriously, thanks for the reviews everyone! Hope you enjoyed the chappie! I'll try to get the next one soon! **DON'T FORGET TO REVIEW!** Oh and please join my yahoogroup! Be a Slytherin! See ya! slythe

## Chapter 32- The Calm before the Storm

"Hannah! I cannot believe you would even consider this!"

Hannah Abbot winced tearfully as Blaise Zabini violently punched the wall behind him, turning back to glare at her with enraged, hurt gray eyes. He ran a hand through his hair, instantly messing up the tamed spikes and closed his eyes, trying to calm himself down.

He could still remember the haunting words in the letter she had sent him... *'We have to talk... I can't do this anymore...'* The moment he had read those four simple words, he knew right away that something was wrong... He could somehow feel it even through the tense way she had written them....

He had been searching for her the entire day now, wanting to demand the truth...And it seemed as though she had been avoiding him somehow... Blaise felt a rising chill up his spine... Something felt wrong... He could *feel* it creeping up on him... And he knew *he* was the one who was going to get hurt...

He opened his eyes again and stared into the eyes of his girlfriend, his heart nearly breaking in half when he was able to make out what was in her gaze... *Resignation...Pain...Surrender...* He didn't like it...He had never seen her eyes look like that before...

"Okay.... Let me get this straight...After everything that's happened between us...After everything...*everything* that I've done...I've *given up* for you—no—to *be* with you...You're breaking up with me?" He asked calmly, setting his hands firmly onto the wall behind her, caging her against the wall with his own body.

Hannah nodded, sighing as she tried to hide the tears forming in her eyes. She winced again as Blaise instantly pulled away and smashed his fist against the opposite wall again, cursing out so loud that everyone in the hallway turned to look at the couple.

"*FUCK!* Fuck this, Hannah! *Fuck!* How the fuck could you even consider dumping me?!" He exploded, growling as he barely prevented himself from doing anything to hurt her, clenching his fists tightly at his side.

Hannah took a shaky breath before answering refusing to look up and meet his gaze. "I—I think...I-it's for the best, Blaise... You and me...W-we're never going to make it.... We're worlds apart... This is never going to work..." She whispered, her voice shaking and cracking as she tried to force the painful words out.

Blaise swallowed the forming lump in his throat and walked back to stand in front of her, ignoring the passing stares as he instantly kneeled down in front of her until she could see his misty gray eyes.

"Was it the Slytherins? Did they do anything to make you do this, Hannah?" He asked gently, using his finger to tilt her chin towards him. Hannah met his gaze with her own teary eyes, forcing herself to shake her head.

"N-no...I...Blaise, this was my own decision... I... I think it would be better if we just forget this... That way...No one has to go through all this... I can't take all the mockery from your friends, Blaise... I've had enough..." She whispered, her eyes dulling to a dark shade.

Blaise instantly bolted back up, his gray eyes flashing. "So that's it huh? You're just going to give up that easily all because of a few damn obstacles? You're not even going to fight for our relationship?! For us? Or for *me*?!" He spat out in disgust, looking her down.

Hannah finally shoved him away, her hands dropping dejectedly to her sides. "I'm just tired, Blaise! I've had enough! I can't take this anymore! I don't want a kind of relationship in which I have to *fight* those monsters just to get them to respect me!" She blurted out, covering her face with her hands.

Blaise's face fell as he yanked her towards him in a desperate attempt, persistently wrapping her in his embrace. "Please Hannah...*Don't* give up on us...Don't give up on me, please... We were going to go to the Slytherin party together remember? We were going to show everyone up...We were going to have fun together...Just like we always do...*Without* caring what everyone else thinks...Hannah, please...I promised you that we'd fight this together right? And we will...I promise, Hannah, we will..." He pleaded softly, not at all caring if he was out of character.

Hannah sighed and tried not to melt in his arms, knowing she couldn't push him away if she did. "Blaise... I...I can't... I've already made my decision... I..." She sighed and looked at him with tearing eyes again. "I want out... I'm so sorry... I don't think I'm emotionally strong enough to keep you...Not if I have to keep fighting for my pride like this..." She whispered in a deathly silent tone, shutting her eyes.

Blaise felt all the blood drain out of his handsome face as he tried to take in her words, not wanting to believe that Hannah had just said such a painful thing directly to his face. No...It couldn't be...He couldn't handle it if she did...

"I...I...I g-gave up everything for you....I—I w-was *willing* to give up everything for you... My friends...My popularity... My *pride*...And you...You're not even resolute enough to commit the same strength for me...? I thought we were fighting this together...I thought you were on *my* side..." Blaise asked quietly, his voice dead and flat but dripping with suppressed pain.

Hannah bit her lip as another tear spilled down her glistening cheeks, trying to control her sobs. "I'm so sorry, Blaise... You're everything I had ever dreamed about...You know that...But...But even I know that a fairytale dream never turns out happy in the end..." She turned to look him directly in the eye, raising a hand to touch his cheek.

Blaise flinched but didn't pull away, keeping steely gray eyes on her face as she spoke again. "I don't want to keep fighting for something that probably isn't going to last at all...For something—no—*someone* so damn perfect that I probably *didn't* deserve to have..." She said in conclusion, biting her lip as Blaise drew in a sharp breath as though he had been punched right in the gut.

"Perfect, Hannah? I'm so damn perfect, then why are you dumping me like this...?" Was all he managed to say, his voice barely above a whisper as he felt the painful stinging in the corner of his eyes. Hannah looked away hastily, shielding her eyes from view and squelching the gasp that threatened to escape at the pain his words caused.

"You were my first ever boyfriend, Blaise... And I will always have a place for you in my heart... I promise... And we had a lot of wonderful

moments together which I will cherish forever... But maybe... Maybe it's time to step out of the dream world and face reality..." She whispered as well, now crying openly in front of him.

Blaise pulled back harshly, stung again and withdrew easily to give her a calm, measured smirk, hiding the excruciating burning in his chest. "Reality? And just what is reality for you, Hannah? Care to tell me?" He hissed, narrowing his eyes at her.

Hannah blinked and glared at him through a wild tangle of blonde hair, tears continuously rolling down her cheeks. "Oh stop pretending, Blaise! You're a Slytherin! I'm a Hufflepuff! It was a mistake from the beginning! Maybe we never should have started this! Maybe they were right! Maybe they were *all* right! Maybe it was all just some *bloody hopeful* mistake that we both were stupid enough to make!" She screamed at him, her vision blurry.

Blaise felt a single tear finally escape his eyes and roll down his cheek but he wiped it away angrily, giving her a cold sneer. "A mistake?" He whispered again, his tone cold as he felt a sharp pang in his chest at the cruel words.

"Well wake up, Blaise! It's over! I can't take this anymore! I just want to be free to date someone without having to feel like the most disgusting creature on the planet! I just want to date someone without having to lose my self-respect!" She screamed again, collapsing onto the wall.

Blaise's left eye merely twitched as he stared at her, unmoving as he ignored the increasing painful tightening in his chest. "So this is about you, isn't it?" He asked bitterly, giving her a disgusted look.

Hannah shook her head fiercely, looking slightly hysterical. "No it isn't about me, Blaise! It's never been about me! That's the whole point! In case you haven't noticed, ever since we've been dating, I've done anything but to bloody show all those monsters you call friends that I'm a human being! Ever since we started dating, it's always been *'she doesn't deserve him'* or *'how could he date someone like her?'* I'm sick of it, Blaise! Maybe—" Hannah stopped midsentence and finally gave him a look, wiping her tears away hastily.

"Maybe they're right... Maybe it *is* better...I-it's better this way...M-maybe..." She stepped closer and locked her eyes intently with his own teary ones, his gaze cold and unforgiving. "Maybe it just wasn't meant to be...." She whispered, shakily caressing his cheek.

"Answer me Hannah... Did you honestly ever love me at all?" He whispered back, his voice too weak to show any emotion he was feeling as he lifted dead, lifeless eyes to her face. Hannah bit her lip, her eyes filling up with tears again as she answered him in a voice as weak as his... "...*Maybe*..."

*Maybe*...The word echoed in again and again through his ears, each time sending a searing pain right through his chest as the reality of her confession hit him...She was breaking up with him...*She* was dumping him after everything...With that simple words...She had ripped out his heart and stabbed it with a knife...With that single '*maybe*' she had tossed him back into the water...She had played him...She didn't love him...She... Blaise blinked, anger seeping into his eyes to help hide the pain.

He instantly flinched from the cold, empty touch and took a step back, giving her the darkest glare he knew he could. "*Maybe?! Fucking Maybe*...That's right...*Maybe...Maybe...Maybe*...You know... I have a few '*maybes*' of my own, Hannah...*Maybe* they *were* right about one thing...You wanna know what that is?" He asked icily, his sneer in place and sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Hannah shook her head weakly in acceptance, understanding his anger. It hurt to see Blaise treating her this way again but she knew she deserved it...She hurt him... She knew she did... She had not only hurt the first boy she had ever truly cared about...But she destroyed him...She had shattered his trust and had probably disillusioned his first memory of what 'love' was...And with that knowledge, she had shattered her own heart into a million pieces in the process ...She was scum.

"*Maybe* it *is* better this way....*Maybe* you really weren't the right person for me... Maybe it was just all some fucked-up mistake...Some fucked-up crazy dream...Some kind of *sick joke* for you huh? Oh yeah...Date the cocky Slytherin then dump him hard

right back into the dirt when he least expects it to pay him back for everything...To show that even Hufflepuffs like *you* enjoy humiliation..." Blaise mocked bitterly, giving her a hard smile.

Hannah shot up instantly, her teary eyes going wide in denial. "No! Blaise, it was *never* like that, I don't want to hurt you! I just—"

"You know what, Hannah?! I think you're right...*Maybe* we *were* just a mistake to begin with...and maybe we never should have happened at all...Maybe all you really wanted to do was to make a complete fool out of me...And congratulations at that! Because you succeeded, I can tell you!" He started hissing out, causing Hannah to back away in pain. "Blaise, please...That wasn't my intention..." She whispered, trying to block out the words.

"*Maybe* I was just wrong about you...*Maybe* my friends were *fucking* right about dating other houses...All they do is humiliate you and *fucking* play you for a fool...Maybe I should stick to my own kind from now on...Maybe Hufflepuffs are bloody disgusting after all..." His voice trailed off for a moment, shaking in pent-up emotions.

"Blaise, *please!* That's *not* what I meant, I'm so sorry!"

"Maybe, maybe, *fucking* maybe, Hannah! *Fucking* maybe!" He continued cruelly, a mocking sneer on his lips as he ignored her protests.

"Blaise, please stop it!" Hannah pleaded, cowering back into the wall as she put her hands over her ears to block out his words. Blaise ignored her, reaching forward to take her hands off her ears before speaking again, leaning forward to let his breath seductively linger on her ear.

"And you know what else?" He hissed again, a cruel smirk on his face as Hannah winced at his voice. He leaned over until his lips brushed against her earlobe, causing the girl to shut her eyes tighter and shiver desperately.

"Maybe they were right...you *don't* deserve me...*Abbot*..." He whispered in conclusion, his voice dropping into a slow, weak and



defeated drawl. Hannah opened her eyes instantly and eyed him, looking pale.

"Yes... Maybe I didn't Zabini..." She whispered back, barely audible as she sighed for the last time and calmly pulled herself out of his arms, slowly turning around and stalking away from her first love, ignoring her blurred, teary vision as she willed herself not to turn around to see him one last time. She had to do this... She had to give him up... As much as it left her an empty feeling inside... As much as she hated herself for hurting him this way...

Blaise watched her leave silently, keeping the cold sneer on his face as other students turned to give him sympathetic looks, which he returned with a hateful snarl of anger. He didn't want their pity. He didn't care... He would live through this...

He felt his eyes stinging dangerously again as he slowly willed himself to walk in the opposite direction, his footsteps unsteady and forced as he looked up and met the curious gaze of everyone around him in the hallway.

He stopped however when he saw another gaze looking up at him—Emerald green eyes watching him gently from a couple of feet away where he had stood, the orbs looking right through him and piercing his mask.

AJ gave him a small smile, offering a hand. Blaise tried to snort but it ended up as a choked up sound as he tried to swallow another lump in his throat again, giving his best friend a forced smirk. "H-how long have y-you been standing th-there?" He managed, shakily taking the hand offered.

AJ squeezed his hand, her eyes darkening in remorse as she gave a soft, pained sigh. "Long enough..." Was all she whispered, raising her eyes again to give him a comforting gaze.

Blaise nodded, showing that he understood what she meant but didn't protest when AJ stepped up to him, keeping his hand held tightly in hers. "You did nothing wrong, Blaise." She said quietly as Blaise lowered his eyes, glaring down silently at the floor. AJ sighed and

squeezed his hand again, lightly punching his shoulder. Blaise looked up weakly at her, his face pale and lifeless for the first time in months.

".....Back up on your feet, Zabini." Was all she said before Blaise silently stepped forward and collapsed resignedly into her open arms, burying his face into her shoulder to hide the escaping tears as he blinked to fight them away.

AJ wrapped her arms around him in sisterly embrace of offered comfort, allowing him to hide his face as she could only glare at anyone who stared at them while Blaise kept his eyes on the floor, resting his forehead against AJ's shoulder without bothering to return the hug.

"You'll get through this." AJ whispered again as Blaise could only nod in response, closing his eyes again. For the first time in his life, Blaise Zabini knew of heartbreak...

"Dammit, Malfoy! Wake up!"

Draco groaned and shoved off the offending shaking and tossed his blanket over himself, trying to bury himself deeper into his covers. "Oh bugger off and go hump a damn shrub." He snapped sleepily, growling in response.

He heard a brief round of laughter in front of him, causing him to open one bleary eye and slowly peel the sheets off to see Harry, Crabbe and Goyle peering down at him with wide smirks on their faces, looking amused.

"What the bloody hell are you all staring at?!" Draco snapped, narrowing his eyes at them while Harry only smirked and hurled a pair of robes at his face before plopping down at the foot of his bed to pull on his boots.

"Rise and shine, Malfoy...Time for some early morning training remember? You guys all promised to help me out this morning. The third task is after this weekend." He said, chuckling as Draco grumbled in response, hesitantly rolling out of bed.

"We *a/ways* help you train, Potter... Don't see why though... Seeing that you're an ungrateful little brat." Draco muttered back as he yawned loudly and headed for the bathroom to have a quick shower, slamming the door shut behind him.

"Hey Theo, you coming?" Harry asked, turning to the lone figure currently sitting on the bed across from Blaise. Theodore looked up from his Potions book, checking his watch. "I don't think so. It's 5:30 AM in the morning and I prefer to spend some time alone today, Potter." He said easily but Harry laughed and grabbed the book out of his hands, rudely tossing it across the room.

"Come on, you're *a/ways* spending time to yourself. When are you going to learn to bond a little more with your group here? We could use another sly mind." Harry pointed out, obviously in a good mood as he raised an eyebrow at him.

Theodore didn't look amused as he raised his wand and summoned his book back to his waiting hands, rolling his eyes in irritation. "Very creative, Potter and no thank you, I have better things to do than train with idiots." He kidded wryly, causing Harry to narrow his eyes at him.

"You have a very amusing mouth there, Nott...And for your information, Prof. Snape requested that the more Slytherins I can bring, the better. You can quit the smart-ass comments." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he finished up his boots and went to gel his hair in the mirror.

Theodore smirked and calmly turned another page in his potions book, shaking his head at their comments. He knew he wasn't half as popular or charismatic as either Harry or Draco but he also knew that he had something none of the Slytherin boys in their group had—*maturity*. His father had always told him that he had the mind of a young man rather than a teenager...That was probably why he chose to keep away from his Slytherin peers no matter how praised or respected they were.

About ten minutes later, they heard the bathroom door open again and a dripping wet Draco walked back in, a single black towel wrapped around his waist as he headed over to his trunk.

"Malfoy, you could at least have the decency to dry yourself up first before walking out of the bathroom." Theodore said calmly, gingerly turning a page of his book before raising cold blue eyes to glare pointedly at the blonde.

All he got in response but a rude smirk of disdain. "Don't mind Nott there, Harry... You know he's always been the most boring and overanxious among all of us." Draco said as carefully began putting on his uniform before walking over to the mirror beside Harry to fix his hair.

"I prefer the term '*mature*', Malfoy and fine...If you are all going to start badgering me about it then I'll go but only to make sure none of you *children* get hurt." Theodore smirked smugly at them, setting his book calmly down before heading over to the bathroom.

Draco snorted resentfully, glaring at his back. "You know if his family wasn't one of the few remaining purebloods left, I'd kill him." Draco muttered to Harry, who chose to smirk at his comment. "Now, now Draco...Play nice...We can't have you fighting our own kind now can we? That would destroy our little fraternity." Harry pointed out, whispering a single spell to add a tinge of red to the tips of his spiked hair.

The blonde only gave another scoff in response but knew his best friend had made a valid point. Slytherins needed to stick together on this...They couldn't afford to fight their own kind...No matter how much they bloody annoyed the hell out of each other. As far as he could remember, he and Nott had *never* been the best of friends. In fact, among all the boys in the year, he was the only one whom Draco hardly knew anything about and despised due to his outward reluctance to mingle with the group. There was also the way he only seemed to talk decently to *Harry* alone as though he was the only one he respected...That did *nothing* to earn Draco's esteem at all...

"Like he ever understood the meaning of *fraternize* anyway..." Draco muttered under his breath so Harry couldn't hear as he promptly began to apply some magic gel onto his blonde hair, slicking it back neatly from his handsome, aristocratic face.

"I swear Malfoy...You and Potter are such girls..." Crabbe grunted in comment as he saw the popular Slytherin duo fussing over their appearance in the mirror, causing Goyle to laugh in response.

"Well they might be but they're *whipped* girls now..." Goyle added in his low voice, causing both Draco and Harry to shoot them a dangerous glare as the pair of usually silent thugs laughed again.

"Oh yeah, Draco, I've been meaning to ask you..." Harry suddenly spoke up as he neatly began to fix his Slytherin tie on himself, meeting Draco's eyes through the mirror.

Draco raised an eyebrow in response. "Pansy's mentioned to me the other day that she heard AJ screaming late at night...Something about a nightmare...I asked AJ herself but surprisingly...She wouldn't tell me...Do *you* know anything about it?" Harry asked grimly, his gaze piercing as he eyed Draco's features carefully.

The blonde could only sigh and stride over to his own trunk to get a green tie, careful not to let the other boys see his face. "Yeah... She... She came up here one time because she had a nightmare...A nightmare about you actually...You and...*Voldemort*." Draco replied easily, looking up to see Harry's wide eyes.

"And? What did she tell you?! And why didn't she tell me anything about it?!" Harry suddenly asked, enraged as his eyes flashed in slight hurt at his sister telling Draco something *he* should have known before him. Draco gave him a weak, sly smirk. "You were with Granger at the time remember...?" He pointed out wryly, causing Harry to stop and darken a tinge of red.

Crabbe and Goyle both smirked at the look on his face, causing Harry to silence them with a glare. "Oh shut up." He hissed, returning the smirk. Crabbe only held up his hands in a surrender in response while Goyle grinned again, turning back to dressing himself.

Draco sniggered at this but said nothing, only giving Harry a pointed glance. "She didn't tell me anything about what it was about except that...And she never mentioned it ever again after... Only that she didn't want you to go through with the Third Task." He drawled, finally

surveying his reflection at the mirror, smiling smugly at the perfection of himself.

Harry sighed and shook his head, taking one final glance of himself before he walked back to sit down casually on Draco's neatly made up four-poster. "She knows I can't do that... I never back out from a challenge... Look no matter what happens I am going *into* that maze you guys...And I need you all to help me prepare for it." He said, looking at all of them.

"That reminds me...Are you asking Granger to the Slytherin Party tomorrow, Harry?" Draco suddenly asked, his eyes narrowing in disdain at the mention of the Gryffindor but Harry silenced his comment with a single glare, looking annoyed.

"I haven't spoken to her yet but I *will*, Draco. Since Lila and Pansy said the party was for *me*, I'd like my girlfriend to be there now would I? I believe it's a fair price for me allowing you to go with my sister, Draco." Harry said darkly, causing Draco to flush slightly at the comeback.

"The party is a bit sudden though isn't it? Does it always have to be held at the end of the year?" Theodore suddenly piped up loudly from the bathroom, causing the other two boys to jump in surprise.

Draco just answered with a weak glare before turning back to Harry, rolling his eyes. "Fine. Invite the mudblood but make sure she stays out of the way...I never thought a Gryffindor would ever be allowed in our private celebrations." Draco complained loudly, rolling his eyes.

Harry glared at him again, his green eyes flashing dangerously. "Watch it, Draco. One more word and you're finished...Now let's go, Prof. Snape is probably waiting for us." He said, grabbing his wand from his bedside table and shoving it into his robe pocket.

A slight movement out of the corner of his eye suddenly startled him as he nearly jumped to see Blaise suddenly pulled back the curtains around his bed, the dark-haired boy turning to give them a familiar smirk.

"Mind if I join you guys then?" He asked lightly, sitting up on his bed to reveal his already neatly worn robes and his own perfectly styled hair. It was obvious that he had been awake long before any of them had. Draco scoffed and gave him a sneer, raising a single eyebrow in response. "What makes you think we'll let you join us, Zabini? Don't you have business with a certain Hufflepuff this morning?" Draco asked snidely, causing Blaise to stiffen in tension.

Harry watched as the other boy gave a half-shrug and sighed, looking up to give them all a sheepish look. "Look...That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you guys about... I um..." He looked away as his gray eyes began darkening again, bitterness, blameworthy and self-loathing obviously found in their depths.

"Woman problems?" Theodore suddenly spoke up as he walked back into the room now fully dressed in his robes, causing all five other Slytherins to jump in surprise. Blaise sighed again and could only give them a dark, shamefaced smile. "More like *girl* problems... She...She *dumped* me, mates..." He whispered coldly, wincing as he anticipated a loud round of laughter from them.

To his utter surprise, it *didn't* come. Instead, the Slytherins only stayed silent and nodded for him to continue, as anyone would have expected, their blank, cool faces perfectly masking their emotions at that very moment.

Blaise hid his face in his hands for a second, too ashamed of his own stupidity and stubbornness to face the sneers he could almost see through their masks. "I...I should have listened to you guys... I should have seen it coming... I...I guess...I...I'm...I'm hoping you guys would take me back." He said in a harsh whisper, keeping his face buried in his hands to hide the dark hostile look in his usually bright eyes.

Draco looked pointedly at Harry, a smug sneer on his handsome face and Harry could only sneer back, knowing exactly what Draco was trying to send to him privately. "*That's what happens when you date one not of your own kind...*" He didn't believe any of it...What happened to Blaise was *his* relationship...Hermione would never do that to him...

"Dammit...She...*She* dumped *me*! I couldn't believe it at first....After everything I was willing to go through for her; she just dropped me like some kind of fling! I don't think I've ever experienced having my pride so crushed before!" Blaise blurted out angrily, oblivious to his housemates meeting each other's gazes.

"Pretty manipulative for a Hufflepuff isn't she?" Harry smirked, causing Blaise to let out a choked-up laugh dripping in bitterness in spite of his pain. "You have *no* bloody idea, Potter... I swear... I...I don't know *who* to trust anymore..." He whispered, turning away.

Draco rolled his eyes, smirking as he clapped Blaise lightly on the shoulder, causing the other Slytherin to look up at him in surprise and anxiety, almost as if he was waiting for the punch line.

"We get it already, Zabini. You were being a complete idiot, you fell for her, you went against us for it, she dumped your sorry, pathetic ass, you learned from it and you came back. Now can we move on and get to our training? I don't want Prof. Snape to wring our necks for being late you know." He pointed out, causing Blaise's eyes to go even wider.

"Wh-what...?!" Was all he managed to stutter out as Harry, Draco, Crabbe, Goyle and even Theodore all laughed out loud at the absolutely bewildered look on his face. "Merlin, Zabini, you should see your face! Now get your sorry ass out of bed and hurry up, we're late." Harry pointed out, smirking as he also clapped the other boy on the back, offering his hand to help him up.

Blaise stared at it uncertainly for a minute, looking slightly doubtful before he allowed a grin that didn't seem to reach his eyes and clasped it firmly with his own, jumping back firmly onto his feet and making to grab his boots. "Wicked hell..." Was all he muttered as Draco and Harry both turned away to retrieve their wands.

"So...Who are you taking to the party tomorrow then? I could set you up with some girls easily you know." Draco offered, giving Blaise a smug smile but Blaise just shook his head, looking amused but relieved. "No thanks...I can get a date myself, Malfoy. But to be honest, I'd rather *not* look at *any* female specimen right now." Blaise admitted, not being able to repress a sigh as he spoke.



"Honestly...That's what you get for dating girls, Blaise...You should date older ones, they have much more experience." Theodore told him but he stopped when Blaise gave him an annoyed roll of the eyes. "I think I'll put off dating for now... I've learned that women are just as evil as the next dark lord...I've learned *my* lesson...I'll never trust them again...ever...Right now, I'm just glad you guys welcomed me back into the fold. I thought you guys hated me." He admitted acrimoniously, shoving his wand in his pocket.

Harry narrowed his eyes at him, looking amused. "Now who said we welcomed you back into the fold?" He sneered, causing Blaise to freeze abruptly and turn wide eyes to him again. No one spoke for a long time as they watched Harry tensely, waiting for the respected Slytherin to make a move.

Finally, the corners of Harry's lips twitched, curving up into a smirk again. "*Furnunculus!*" He suddenly drawled, causing Blaise to gape and duck hastily in response as the spell managed to hit the wall behind him instead. Harry chuckled his alluring laugh, causing all his friends to roll their eyes in response. "Had you for a minute there didn't I?" He smirked, laughing at Blaise's enraged growl.

"*FUCK!* Potter, you damn bastard!"

Harry's smirk instantly turned into a smug grin. "Last one to the Potions Classroom is a bloody Hufflepuff who gets to be Prof. Snape's first practice dummy!" He drawled out lazily before rudely shoving Draco out of the way, tearing out the door.

"Cheating, arrogant asshole!" Draco cursed out loud before tearing off after him, Blaise closely at his tail. Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other and shrugged before tearing after them, leaving a slightly amused Theodore Nott following after them at his own relaxed pace, taking his time to shut the door neatly behind him.

"Stop *trying* to hit me with the spell Potter and *hit me!!*" Snape yelled out loud as Harry let out another grunt and ducked as Draco's stunning spell barely missed him as it zoomed right above his head. Draco smirked and raised his wand again, this time pointing it directly at Harry.

"*Imperio!*" He yelled out the recently hard-earned spell, causing Harry to widen his eyes instantly and turn to him in a flash, his green eyes alive and alert. "*Mossssspherio Diatiusss!*" He hissed back in thick parseltongue, ducking the Unforgivable.

"Damn!" Draco cursed out loudly as he, along with every other Slytherin circled around Harry, got pelted with a bright beam of green light, all their heavy forms slamming painfully onto the walls of the magically-guarded Potions classroom.

"Okay...Now *that one* hurt, Potter..." Blaise complained loudly as he winced in pain, rubbing his sore back and bending down to retrieve his wand from the floor once more. Snape, who was the only one who had managed to avoid Harry's spell, smirked at them and gestured for them to circle around Harry again.

"Very good, Harry although next time, try not to let your guard down so easily." Snape said, nodding as he handed back some of the other boys their wands, still smirking in amusement.

"You still have yet to hit Prof. Snape, Harry." Theodore pointed out as he took his position again, his wand ready in his hands. Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. "I know, I'm trying. Oh and Professor? Won't we get caught in here if Draco here keeps using an Unforgivable?" He asked, giving Draco a glare.

Prof. Snape shook his head and gestured lazily to the walls around them, giving his students a superior smirk. "These walls are magically protected so that the Ministry will have no idea of what spells are being cast in here. That is why I specifically chose it as my classroom...It was Salazar's training room." He told them, nodding.

Harry's eyes widened slightly in amazement. "I see... Oh that reminds me...Draco, you put up those locking spells on the door right?" He suddenly asked, turning to Draco who nodded impatiently in response, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah...Now let's get started again, Potter...I still have yet to make you plead to me for mercy." Draco said snidely, giving Harry a challenging sneer which the boy was only glad to return. "Let's see if you're as good as your mouth says you are then, Malfoy..." Harry

taunted back, assuming a dueling stance again as he eyed the circle of Slytherins around him.

"*Everte Statum!*" Blaise suddenly cursed out loud, causing both Harry and Draco to turn to him in shock before moving to dodge the spell, glaring at the other Slytherin. Blaise sneered deviously, giving them a shrug. "It was worth a shot..." He said slowly.

"*Serpenify!*" Snape drawled lazily from where he was watching them, directing his wand right at Harry, who instantly doubled over in pain from where the spell had hit his right leg, causing him to collapse onto the floor.

"What spell was that, Professor? I don't believe you've taught us that one before..." Theodore asked curiously as they bent over Harry's writhing form, seeing the forming, ugly wound on his ankle.

"Damn...It's almost like a snake bite..." Harry hissed through clenched teeth as he clutched at the stinging wound, watching as the skin around the blood began to turn a sickly green. Draco sniggered, looking at him. "Oh, Potter, that's absolutely disgusting..." He drawled, laughing harder when Harry glared at him.

He didn't get to talk much however as Snape merely raised an eyebrow and muttered the same spell again, this time managing to hit Draco right in the shoulder, tearing his robes. "Ow! Bloody hell, Professor! What was that for?" Draco wheezed out as he collapsed onto the floor, clutching at his shoulder in excruciating pain.

Snape nodded his assent, leaning over to inspect their writhing bodies as Blaise, Theodore, Crabbe and Goyle peered over them and watched with amused smirks on their faces. "One principle of mine, Mr. Malfoy is that I believe my students would learn spells better if they experience what it feels like." Snape said, his tone annoyingly light and easy as he watched the venom start to creep up onto Draco's neck.

Draco's silver eyes widened in panic, stiffening immediately while he tried to keep his cool. "Er...Professor...Wh-what's happening?" Draco asked nervously as the venom started to make him feel numb, his whole body tingling in its poison. "Yes, Professor Snape... I..erm... I

would like to know that myself..." Harry muttered in agreement, noticing the loss of feeling in his right leg.

Snape merely smirked and turned away from them, gesturing for the other four to get back into their training circle. "It's a Snake Venom spell...Another form of *parselmagic* if I may say so... Perhaps not as practical but effective in battle nevertheless...The venom works rather quickly through the blood, I believe...You should both be feeling lightheaded and completely paralyzed right now..." He said, turning back to see Draco and Harry both wide eyed, unable to move.

"I thought so... All the same... *Finite Serpens.*" He muttered, waving his wand at them again, causing the wound to heal up instantly and the Slytherin duo to blink and shoot back up, relief obvious on their faces.

Draco eyed his torn robes before grumbling and walking back to his position across from Harry, who was now in the middle of the circle, his wand ready in his hand once again. "Now...On three, you will all cast a simple snake venom spell on Harry...Remember to hiss out your 's' like that of a snake, that's very important." Snape instructed, moving to watch them from outside the circle.

Harry turned incredulous eyes at his Head of house. "But professor, you want me to handle all five of them casting at me at once?!" He exclaimed, not being able to hide the fear in his voice. Draco and Blaise both sniggered while Snape smirked, gesturing to Crabbe and Goyle.

"I'd just focus on Malfoy, Nott and Zabini here if I were you Potter...Crabbe and Goyle here haven't been able to keep up with us ever since we left off the simple hexes and curses." Snape said derisively, glaring at the said pair while they muttered something unintelligent in response.

Harry squelched another groan of exhaustion as he forced himself to nod and turn to his friends again, readying himself to fend them off. He couldn't help but scowl in annoyance, wondering just how exactly this was going to help him win the third task...He needed useful spells...Not dark dueling training no matter how useful it was...

"Oh don't give me that face, Potter...Should you or should you *not* encounter something dangerous in that maze...Particularly *Voldemort*, I can assure you that he or his death eaters will not hesitate in attacking you any way they can. That includes fighting you as one group. It is best you know how to defend yourself against such an attack. I am training you with *this* instead of those simple foolish spells for the third task because I know *this* is the training that can *save your life*. The third task is of no importance to me and I am aware that I do not *need* to train you for that if we were only talking of *the task itself* here. This training is for *Voldemort*...*Not* for that damn tournament. I hope I am making that clear." Snape suddenly hissed into his ear, his eyes flashing.

Harry set his face into a firm look of challenge as he nodded in agreement and respect, turning back once more to face Draco, Blaise and Theodore all sneering at him and readying their stance.

"You scared, Potter?" Draco taunted lightly as he began twirling his wand in his hand, watching Harry's emerald green eyes dart from one Slytherin to the other. "Oh you wish, Malfoy." Harry countered, masking his slight uneasiness with a smirk as his fingers wrapped tighter around his wand.

Draco merely chuckled, raising his wand until it was in perfect level with Harry's chest. "Not as much as you're going to wish *you* could..." He taunted back darkly as Snape signaled them to get ready.

"Now...On three...Raise your wands and shout the spell clearly and loudly...If it misses, continue on with your attack. Do *not* hold back. One...Two...Thre—" But, as usual, Draco was ahead of time as he immediately yelled out "*Serpenify!*" and pointed his wand at his best friend, causing the other Slytherins to stop and blink in surprise.

*Wrong move, Draco... You should have attacked all together.* Harry thought with a superior gleam in his eye, easily knowing what tactic to use. He tried not to roll his eyes at Draco's predictability as he hastily raised his own wand to counter the spell. "*Gustos.*"

Draco tried not to curse in annoyance as the spell was instantly absorbed away and Harry pointed his wand at him again, assuming his own dueling stance. "*Avernus Inflammatory!*" He yelled right at the

same time Blaise and Theodore both shouted out the venom spell once more, causing Snape to smirk as he watched.

Draco winced and ducked to avoid the deadly blaze of red that shot past him while Harry quickly countered Blaise's spell and bent down to avoid Theodore's, another spell already on his mind.

"*Obsssscurio!*" He hissed out, aiming his wand at Blaise. Blaise blinked in confusion for a minute, unaware before he finally stumbled backwards violently against the wall, his vision completely obscured into darkness.

"Damn you, Potter..." Blaise muttered loudly as he began feeling his way around the room. Harry smirked in satisfaction and turned back to face a still recovering Draco and Theodore, who was just about getting ready to cast another spell.

"*Sssceleriss!*" Theodore whispered lightly, casting another Parselmagic spell Snape had taught them just last week which Harry knew was *not* pretty.

Harry barely managed to twist around it before he lunged forward and raised his wand again, his muscles tense for action. "*Expelliarmus!*" He shouted, smirking as a surprised Theodore's wand instantly zoomed into his waiting hand before he spoke again. "*Serpenify!*" He cried out loudly, the spell only managing to scrape past Theodore's knee but it seemed it was good enough as the boy collapsed onto the ground, clutching his knee.

"Damn it..." He heard the other boy curse in disappointment under his breath before he snapped back to face Draco just in time to see his best friend sneering smugly at him in warning again. "*Imperio!*" He spat out, obviously getting frustrated with Harry's gaining victory.

Harry only grinned and met Draco's spell with his own Imperius Curse, causing the two spells to collide against one another and ricochet off in separate directions. He knew he was lucky...He and Draco had been the only ones so far with enough magical strength and capacity to get the Imperius Curse to work. Theo, however, was a close second, as his emitted a weak beam of light that didn't last long while Crabbe and Goyle's wands did nothing but glow and wither. He

wasn't sure about Blaise yet since the other boy still had yet to learn the said curse.

Snape ducked distractedly as one beam of green light zoomed past his head, his eye focused intently on watching Harry. "*Tesssumorte!*" Harry whispered in parseltongue again, knowing by the unprepared stance his best friend had that he had this one won... *Again...* Draco's eyes widened as the spell hit him right in the chest, causing the blonde to fall back onto the floor.

Harry watched as the spell progress, seeing the darkness of the spell's effect seeping into Draco's usual bright silver eyes, causing the orbs to dull with fear and misery. "Er...Sorry Draco...." He said sheepishly, knowing the spell's harsh effects.

The *Tesumorte* spell...Or '*Black Death Curse*' was quite one of his favorites actually...Frankly because it inflicted upon people the very same thing that happened to a witch or wizard when he or she stood in front of a dementor... It paralyzes the one hit by the imprinting the cruel image of the person's fears and darkest memories, slowly sucking away the life and happiness from him or her... Very advantageous in battle...

Finally, grinning in triumph at Draco, Blaise and Theodore's fallen forms, Harry turned to Crabbe and Goyle, raising an eyebrow. "Your turn... Go ahead guys...Attack me." Harry smirked, raising his wand before he gave them a brief nod.

Crabbe and Goyle both looked at each other before nodding and assuming their own dueling stance. "On three, you two..." Snape said, not being able to help smirking as he shook his head. Crabbe and Goyle nodded and looked at each other again, a wicked gleam appearing in both their eyes that Harry didn't particularly trust.

"One...Two..." Snape smirked wider, obviously seeing what the two Slytherins' intention was on Harry. Harry tensed and stood, ready to fend off any magical hex they would be sending his way.

"*Three!*" Crabbe and Goyle both smirked and promptly dropped their wands before hurling their huge, hulking forms at Harry

simultaneously, winding the dark-haired Slytherin as he fell to the ground under their huge figures.

"*Argh!* Mother of Merlin, get the bloody hell off of me you stupid *cheating* thugs!" Harry cursed loudly as he flailed underneath them, straining to get free. Crabbe and Goyle both gave each other a high five, sniggering while Snape chuckled as well, raising his wand to remove the spells cast on Draco, Blaise and Theodore.

"I have to give them credit, Potter...They *did* bring you down...even if...it was the muggle way..." Snape drawled as he helped the other three to their feet. Draco shook his head hastily, trying to block out the horrifying images in his mind from the Black Death curse before he smirked at Harry.

"Professor! They didn't even use their wands! They flat out jumped at me!" Harry pointed out irritably, kicking at their forms again but to no avail. As trained and lean as he was, Crabbe and Goyle were just too darn huge.

"Exactly. Remember Potter, when we talk of battling to defend yourself, not *every* wizard is willing to fight *only* with magic and wands...Some...Like these two, may choose to attack by physical means. You should be prepared at all times." Snape pointed out knowledgeably, handing the other three boys their wands.

Draco and Blaise smirked at each other before giving Prof. Snape a mischievous grin. "Pile on Potter!" Blaise suddenly yelled before he and Draco both jumped onto the heap of limbs, causing Harry, who was right underneath all of them, to curse loudly in pain.

Theodore merely shook his head at them, dusting his robes and trying to carefully readjust his perfectly well-kept, silver-framed glasses. "Amusing..." He rolled his eyes, "I believe we are just about to finish off, Prof. Snape? I have other matters to attend to." He said politely with the air of the perfect, good-natured gentleman aristocrat that he was known around for.

Draco and Harry both rolled their eyes at this as they finally got back up, Harry wincing in pain from the soreness in his limbs. "What's that, Nott? Going back to reading sissy poetry?" Draco mocked, causing



the other Slytherins to laugh and Theodore to tinge slightly with pink but otherwise give a calm, unaffected smile in return at their open mockery.

"If you must know, Malfoy, yes. You see unlike you and Potter over there, I prefer to charm the ladies with the natural, traditional approach—with *romantic words*, not just looks and a cocky attitude—the way a *real*, mature pureblooded gentleman should. I do not like... being a *jerk*..." He said simply, causing Blaise, Crabbe, Goyle and even Prof. Snape to laugh again as the Slytherin duo flushed in humiliation, glaring at the offender and not daring to believe his words.

"Why you arrogant, no-good bloody pansy-boy, I'll kick your *mature* ass so hard, you'll—" Draco never got to finish his sarcastic remark as Harry held him back easily, not wanting his best friend to embarrass himself. Theodore gave another calm smile, gingerly slipping his wand back into his pocket.

"Now now, Malfoy... I believe I've had enough physical violence for one day. I've never really liked fighting...And if you can't use proper words *or* wands for a more *cultured* dispute, then I don't want to waste any time on you. Honestly... It would seem you are not a Malfoy the way you act so aggressively *rude* all the time." He pointed out confidently. He turned and gave Snape one more respectful nod before he slowly walked out of the room, his footsteps relaxed and leisurely as though he had not just insulted the two most popular and feared boys in school.

Draco watched him leave, his eyes narrowed and resentful and his hands closed into fists. "I swear to god, one day I am going to punch that bastard right in the nose... I hate the way he tries to act all proper and established all the time... I knew there was something weird about him...The moment we met during a grand party my father threw, he preferred to sit alone in the bloody corner reading rather than hang around with me and some other popular purebloods." He muttered to them, causing Harry to smirk.

"Forget about it, Mr. Malfoy...Now before I continue with more exercises, I have a few words to say...Since this *is* your final training

day... Take a seat for a minute." Prof. Snape said, gesturing to the empty seats as he walked to the front of the room.

"As you may remember me saying, I have taught you only one of the forms of the Dark Arts... And you know by now that though that form is the lowest level of Dark Arts, it is *very* powerful and *very* feared. So I do *not* want any of you speaking of this to anyone...Is that understood?" He asked them sternly, watching as the four Slytherins nodded.

"So far... You have only learnt the lower level of *Parselmagic*...The higher level is still much too advanced for your magical limits. And as you can see, I have also taught you the Imperius Curse—the easiest of the Unforgivables. The Imperius Curse is only of rate level 2 Dark Arts after all... Cruciatus I believe is also a higher Level of 2 while Avada Kedavra is Level 3... *These* I will never teach anyone... I already went against the headmaster's trust teaching you the Imperius curse, I do not plan on teaching any more." Snape said slowly, giving them all a silencing glare when Harry made to argue.

"Now why do I teach you these? So you could be aware...And so you could see just how dangerous and difficult it is to take the Dark Arts up... I believe they teach you this at an earlier year in Durmstrang but they teach this in *sixth year* here...That is...*If* you choose to take the course up. I only wanted to prepare you...Especially you, Potter." Snape said, giving Harry a brief nod.

"Now these three levels—*Parselmagic*, The *Unforgivables* and The *Forbidden Arts* are the three basic levels of the Dark Arts. Yes, there are more than three Unforgivables but the most used *and* deadly are the three Moody has taught you. The *Forbidden Arts*...Are absolutely *restricted* to be taught to *any* witch or wizard unless given authority by the Ministry. As far as I know, this is only taken up by especially trained Aurors and Ministry officials for self-defense purposes so I will not even bother talking about any of it." Snape discussed briefly, checking his watch.

"Now, before I end this, I ask of you *once* more to *not* tell anyone about anything you have seen, heard or learned in this classroom. Is that understood? And do not, under any circumstances, use any of

what I have taught you unless absolutely necessary to save your life...That includes *you*, Harry...As much as possible, use only *simple* spells in the tournament. Save the dark spells until the *right* occasion calls for it..." He concluded darkly, emphasizing the word 'right' and watching as Blaise, Crabbe and Goyle both nodded their agreement.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Harry? Draco?" He asked calmly, looking intently at the Slytherin duo as the two barely made to nod their heads, a dark look in their eyes that Snape didn't trust. He'd have to keep a close watch on them... He knew how stubborn the two were when it came to following their own way all the time...

"Very well. Good luck with the Third task, Harry. Now...Stand up...Who's up for defending himself next? Mr. Malfoy?"

"What are they doing?" Hermione asked as she and her other Gryffindor friends passed by a group of Hufflepuffs who were all huddled behind a large Oak tree outside the castle Saturday morning, several of whom seemed to be speaking into something Justin Finch-Fletchley held in his hand.

She noticed vaguely that Hannah didn't seem to be joining them, the said girl seated alone by the lake, her teary eyes focused blankly on the rising sun in front of her. Ginny nudged Hermione, gesturing discreetly to Hannah. "That's probably what she gets for dating a Slytherin..." She said in compassion, giving Hermione a pointed glance which Hermione refused to meet.

Instead, Hermione turned back to the group of huddled Hufflepuffs, her eyebrows fusing together. "What are they doing anyway? They look like they're talking to a walkie-talkie..." Seamus said, looking curious as some Hufflepuffs gave him a glare for daring to peer at them.

Ron and Seamus both rolled their eyes, looking amused while Hermione shook her head, looking at them suspiciously. "No... I don't think so... I've told you both dozens of times, electronic muggle devices don't work at Hogwarts..." She pointed out irritably.

"Eclectic whatcha-ma-jigs?" Ron asked in confusion as Hermione shook her head in annoyance again, allowing a small sound of

frustration to escape her lips. "Oh forget it, Weasley!" She snapped, huffing in irritation.

Ron gave her a weak glare, wincing at his last name. "You better stop hanging around Potter... His rudeness is starting to rub off on you..." He pointed out, smirking and making Hermione go a dark shade of red while Ginny laughed behind them.

"Oh I'm sure he's rubbed off on her in other ways, Ron..." Ginny teased simply, giving Hermione a smug smile as Ron looked absolutely sick at the idea and the other girl blushed darker again, looking completely scandalized. "Oh hush..." Was all she said before she began to walk faster towards their usual place by the lake, wanting to avoid the topic as much as possible.

To be honest, she hadn't really seen her Slytherin prince much these past few days and as much as she wanted to deny it, it was making her heart ache. She missed seeing Harry's sparkling eyes at her when he held her in his arms...

It seemed that the only chance they got to spend some time alone together was when they managed to sneak some late night snuggling or meetings every once in a while... The Slytherin was completely devoted to his training and as it seemed, to the third task as well...

She didn't have any doubts though... She found that she trust Harry now. She knew that he wouldn't be doing anything to hurt her... She loved him enough already for that. She could see it in his eyes... He truly cared about her and it seemed that he was an entirely different person from the one he was in front of the world when they were alone...

And though it annoyed Hermione to hell that he chose to act like the popular, cocky jerk in public when they were together, she knew that it was in his nature to hide his sweet side... it was a side that Harry gave only to *her* and only *she* had the pleasure of seeing and she loved that feeling...She *loved* the feeling that Harry was hers...And that she could call him hers whenever she wanted and no one would be able to deny it...

Sure, she still got insecure at certain times when the girls in the school threw the usual interested glances at the well-known playboy and threw her their usual envious glances as well, she didn't need to worry. Even *AJ* told her that Harry was completely smitten with her as much as he would try to deny it. And she didn't want to admit it...But she had grown quite smug actually because of it... Smug because no matter what those girls did, Harry loved *her*... That was enough to best their useless barbs at her.

"Hermione, wait up!" Ginny called after her, breaking through her inner thoughts as the redheaded girl began to run after her hurrying form. Hermione sighed and turned around just in time for her eyes to widen as she saw her younger friend heading straight for another student.

"Ginny! Watch out!" Hermione yelled out loud, wincing as the girl collided rather roughly against a tall, lean boy in front of her, causing both of them crash to the hard ground, their books scattering around them.

Ginny instantly blushed and began gathering her things hastily, knowing the accident was entirely her fault. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry...Look, I wasn't really looking where I was going and I didn't see you there, I—" She stopped when she caught sight of the bright blue eyes, causing a faint blush to rise up her cheeks again.

Theodore Nott gave her a charming smile as he stood up and offered a hand to help her up as well, his blue eyes surprisingly gentle for a Slytherin. "No, no... Please...Don't apologize, it was *my* fault actually. I saw you coming towards me and I didn't move... Absolutely sorry... It was rude of me." He said easily as Ginny managed to offer her hand and let him pull her back to her feet.

"No... I um... I was chasing after my friend here and I just didn't see you." Ginny mumbled, still blushing under Theodore's intense, piercing gaze at her through the dark strands falling into his wise blue eyes. Hermione couldn't help smirking as she walked calmly over to them, hiding a smile behind her hand at Ginny's flustered face.

"Very well then... To appease you, why don't we say that we're both to blame? And if I may.... Just to make me feel less guilty of my

reprehensible actions, can you at least grace me with a smile of forgiveness?" Theodore offered good-naturedly, his own charming smile on his face.

Ginny blushed again but laughed and did as he said, her eyes sparkling as she met his gaze. "Lovely...Just *beautiful*..." Theodore murmured as he gingerly lifted Ginny's hand and placed a single, lingering kiss on the back of her palm, his eyes never leaving her face and his tone so serious that Ginny barely prevented a shudder.

"Th-Thank you. And It's Ginny...Ginny Weasley." She said, watching as Theodore merely nodded, gently letting go of her hand and bending down right in front of her to gather all her scattered books for her. Hermione couldn't help but smile at the action...It wasn't often that one saw a Slytherin boy act like Theodore did... But then again, he always was the black sheep among his friends.

"Here you go, then Ms. Ginny...I'm Theodore Nott by the way... But call me Theo." He said, offering a disarming grin as he handed her back the books, politely ignoring the dark flush on the younger girl's cheeks and the way her hands shook slightly when she took the books.

"I—I know who you are, Theo...And th-thanks...Oh, this is Hermione...She's—" Ginny never got to finish as Theodore turned to Hermione, the smile never leaving his lips. "Yes, I know Hermione... I must say, birds of the same beauty flock together." He said once again, this time causing Hermione to blush prettily as well.

"Why thank you, Theo. That's sweet." Hermione said, smiling as Theodore repeated the same action he did with Ginny, bending down to kiss her hand before taking a step away from the both of them and reaching down to retrieve his book once more.

"Theo? *Love*, are you ready? Come on, I've got to grab some things in my room before we go off to Hogsmeade, stop playing around with these *girls*." A voice suddenly called out behind them, causing Ginny to whirl around and see a stunningly beautiful Slytherin *seventh* year standing behind Theodore, holding out her hand in a graceful arc.

Theodore nodded once at her request and turned back to give a smile of apology to the two Gryffindors, his eyes hesitantly lingering on Ginny. "Excuse me, I believe I forgot to introduce you. This is Antoinette Whittier, she's—"

"Hi...I'm Theo's *girlfriend*..." She cut in, her perfectly made-up eyes sweeping down to eye both Hermione and Ginny in obvious distaste and resentment but Theodore didn't seem to notice, only smiling his agreement.

"You're in seventh year right?" Hermione asked scathingly, seeing that Ginny was far too tongue-tied to say anything else. Antoinette laughed, merely flipping her glossy mane of brown hair over her shoulder and linking her arm through Theodore's.

"Yes well Theo here acts much older than his actual age so I don't mind... And besides, he's *never* dated anyone his age..." Antoinette pointed out elegantly, her eyes lingering on Ginny's hateful stare at her.

Theodore looked slightly embarrassed at her behavior as he pointedly changed the subject, giving his girlfriend a discreet glare to keep her quiet. "Well we better get going, we're heading down to Hogsmeade today so Antoinette here can find an appropriate attire for tomorrow... The Slytherins are going to have a slight celebration Hermione, has Potter invited you yet? It's to celebrate his so-called *victory* for the last weekend before the task on Monday. Overconfident jerk isn't he?" Theodore asked, smiling as Hermione laughed in response.

"Yes he is...And no, I don't think he's mentioned it yet though but I don't think I'm up for spending a whole afternoon with Slytherins around me." She responded lightly, shaking her head. Antoinette's eyes flashed briefly in irritation as she made to make another rude remark but Theodore's warning blue eyes cut her off before she could say a word.

"Well you should try...Not all Slytherins are biased jerks...Girls included." He said, turning from Hermione to give Ginny one last smile, which the redhead easily returned. Antoinette rolled her eyes.

"Like we'd really want some *Gryffindors* at our private celebration, Theo..." She hissed under her breath at him.

Theodore didn't answer her, merely shaking his head. "Nice meeting you Ginny...You too Hermione...Hope to see you tomorrow... Come on, Antoinette." Theodore said, carefully pulling his girlfriend away from the other girls before anything broke out.

"Yeah...Nice meeting you *Gryffindor 'girls'...*" Antoinette called out sarcastically, putting such a strong emphasis on the words 'girls' again that Ginny would have loved to wring her hands around the brunette's skinny little throat.

With one last smirk at them, Antoinette dragged Theodore off back towards the castle, not bothering to look back and see the other two girls giving her a resentful glare behind them. Ginny's face twisted into the well-known Weasley snarl of hate-at-first-sight, her dark mumbling slightly audible as she watched them leave.

Hermione saw this and gave her a knowing smile, shaking her head. "Ginny, relax... You shouldn't let them get to you. Anyway, where's your brother...?" She asked, hoping to change the subject.

Ginny distractedly gestured over to where Ron, Seamus and the other Gryffindor boys were lounging out by the grass right under a tree by the lake, their eyes occasionally glancing every once in a while as girls passed by them.

Hermione laughed, rolling her eyes. "Figures... Come on, let's go over there and join them before they forget that we're supposed to be doing homework and not checking out other students." She said, making to grab Ginny's arm but she shook her head, standing her ground.

"Are you going to that Slytherin celebration Theo was talking about?" Ginny asked, looking at her as Hermione barely prevented a wince, shaking her head slowly. "I still have to talk to Harry about it and I probably won't...Ginny, the party will be filled with Slytherins, do you want to spend the entire day being mocked out of the party by those jerks?" She pointed out, rolling her eyes at the absurdity of the idea.



"Do you even know anything about it? I mean, where it's going to be held...? What's going to be happening...?" Ginny asked again persistently, her dark eyes twinkling with mischief and light playfulness as she pondered on the very idea.

Hermione narrowed her brown eyes at her, knowing by the look of Ginny's face that she wasn't going to like this. "Why are you so interested, Ginny? Your brothers will kill you if they found out you've been to a *dangerous* Slytherin party and they're going to kill *me* too if we dare to try...Even *I* know that not all of Harry's friends are trustworthy... It'll be too risky... And have you forgotten? We're Gryffindors! They'll throw us out." She tried to reason out again, trying not to groan.

Ginny snorted, flipping her slightly curly red hair over her shoulder. "Do you really think they would, Hermione? You seem to keep forgetting the fact that you are dating one of their leaders...You think Potter is going to let that happen?" She easily countered, smirking when Hermione couldn't find anything to say against her point.

"Well...What about Michael Corner? Your *current* boyfriend?! Do you think he's going to be happy when he finds out you've gone into a party filled with probably drunk Slytherins?!" Hermione pointed out in desperation, biting her lip. She definitely did *not* like where this conversation was going.

Ginny scoffed again, giving her an amused look. "I'm not going to cheat on him! Come on Hermione; is there really anything wrong with going to this celebration? I mean your boyfriend is going to be there...And I only want to go because I'm remotely curious what these Slytherins do during these exclusive parties...Everyone says that they throw the best gatherings around! I don't want to miss going now that you're my ticket in, Hermione! How do they manage it anyways?" She asked, causing Hermione to blush slightly.

"Beats me..." She muttered, not wanting to answer as she clutched her books tighter to her chest. The way things were going, it didn't look like she was going to be able to weasel her way out of this one... She sighed and glanced around the place again, noting that Ron and Seamus were still oblivious to what they were discreetly planning.

The Hufflepuffs have long gone from hiding behind the tree now and were now lounging by their usual area, studying while some Slytherins were hanging around nearest the Forbidden Forest, mingling along with some Beauxbatons students.

Hermione frowned when she saw Fleur Delacour practically making out with a boy she only knew as Roger Davies, both looking incredibly busy that they didn't seem to notice the scene around them. It seemed that every Saturday was always like this...Students would either be lounging inside the castle, studying in the library or lazing around by the lake...

*Doesn't anyone remember that the final exams are next week??* She thought in annoyance as she eyed her own heavy workload in her arms, rolling her eyes as Ginny continued to shoot off questions about the party again.

"Ginny, I already told you! I don't know anything about the party yet! I still have to ask Harry about it!" Hermione said in exasperation, turning back to her redheaded friend. Ginny gave her an innocent smile, casually pointing over Hermione's shoulder at the entrance to the castle. "Why don't you ask him right now? He's heading out of the castle at this very moment." She pointed out haughtily, chuckling when Hermione's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wha—" She whirled around and managed to see, just in time, the Slytherin duo walking confidently out of the castle in their usual haughty, attention-grabbing strides, Crabbe and Goyle again at their sides and to Hermione's dislike, Pansy and Lila were scurrying after them.

As usual, the girls stared, completely doe-eyed as Draco and Harry set their usual smirks on their faces, completely aware of the stares they were receiving and reveling in that fact. She saw Fleur break away from Roger Davies for a brief moment as the girl eyed Draco up and down with a smirk of open interest.

What made Hermione blink in surprise though was that Blaise Zabini was surprisingly with them again and instead of the smile she's been seeing on his face lately, there was a scornful, hateful sneer in its

place, his eyes going to glare vehemently at every single Hufflepuff that they passed.

To her confusion, he didn't glance at Hannah once when they passed by the Hufflepuffs and Hannah's teary gaze at him was only met by a rude comment that sounded suspiciously like "Do you guys smell something?"

Pansy and Lila giggled while Draco answered by smirking at him, his silver eyes moving to glance at Hannah's miserable form. "Yeah.... I do...It's the smell of an ungrateful little bitch..." He drawled, immediately causing the group to laugh harshly and Hannah to shoot up and walk calmly over to them with a determined, unafraid look on her face.

Hermione watched, suddenly proud of the petite Hufflepuff when she saw Hannah walk directly up to Blaise with an angry hurt look on her features. "You know you could at least try to be civil about this! I never meant to hurt you, Blaise! I only wanted what was best for both of us! I wanted us to be friends!" She said sharply, shoving Draco aside to stand right in front of her ex-boyfriend. Pansy met Lila's eye and they both smirked, their eyes twinkling smugly at their discreet triumph.

Draco glared at Hannah, obviously not liking being touched and made to tell Crabbe and Goyle to take her away when Blaise looked up and shook his head at them before glancing back calmly at Hannah with his usual hateful sneer plastered on his face.

"Yeah, friends...Like I'll ever be friends with a sly, manipulative bitch like you! You were absolutely right...You know, I've thought about what you've said, Hannah. You're right. It *is* better this way. And yeah, you saved yourself half the humiliation by being the one to break up with me first; I'll give you that...But know this Hufflepuff..." Blaise walked forward and grabbed her roughly by her slender chin, making her look directly at him.

"You...*and* your house will be reliving the meaning of *hell*. I promise you that." He whispered threateningly, smirking at her before he easily let go of her again, moving around her as though she was some common coat rack.

Harry smirked as he watched, not saying anything as followed after Blaise, all seven of them leaving Hannah standing where she was, completely shocked and wide-eyed at what she had just witnessed. Hermione's eyes flashed in anger as Harry looked up and saw her, giving her a charming smile.

He gestured for the others to follow him before he promptly made his way over to her, ignoring the angry glares directed at him from the Gryffindors who had been watching the scene. "Hey beautiful...." He greeted softly, making to wrap his arms around to her but he never got the chance as Hermione raised a hand and punched him hard on his cheek, giving him her poisonous glare.

Draco smirked, keeping a distance from the Gryffindors with the other Slytherins as Harry cursed out loud, clutching his now reddening cheek in pain. Pansy scowled next to Lila, her eyes glittering maliciously as she glared at Hermione. "Ow! Bloody hell, Hermione! What the fuck was that for?!" He raged, his green eyes flashing as he met Hermione's equally angry glare.

"You disgusting jerks! Don't think I didn't see what you did to Hannah! How could you be so cruel to women?! You act as if you own the damn world!" She screeched at them, directing her anger mostly at Harry as the Slytherin frustratingly only laughed in response.

"Hey, why are you getting all worked up on me? She was the one who dumped Zabini here, I was only sticking up for my friend. She's a heartless little bitch who used him!" Harry defended, holding up his hands as he gave her a disarming smile.

Ginny stepped forward and glared at him, her eyes accusing. "If that's true then where were you when your *friend* Zabini here was being cast away by all the other Slytherins when he and Hannah were still together? Why only proclaiming your friendship *now* that they've broken up?" She pointed out, causing Harry to turn and give her a scathing glare that would have made anyone cower.

"I don't recall asking you to join in the conversation, Weasley. Fuck off." He said darkly, a sneer on his face that masked his growing agitation. Ginny only glared back but didn't bother saying anything

else, knowing that would be suicide considering that his entire gang was behind him.

"Anyway... Before you oh-so-rudely punched me, I wanted to ask you something much more important than Blaise and Abbot's break-up." Harry said slowly, turning back to glance at Hermione again and annoyed to see her about to head off towards Hannah.

"Show some respect to Harry, you bitch!" Pansy snapped angrily, causing Hermione to stop and turn back to see Harry glaring very threateningly at Pansy, causing the blonde girl to immediately shut up and back off. "Amazing how girls don't know how to show a little respect anymore..." Draco mentioned, his silver eyes openly leering at Hermione.

Hermione just smirked back, knowing by now how to handle these Slytherins before she turned back to Harry, giving him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Harry. What were you going to say?" She asked, fighting back another smile when Harry's eyes sparkled affectionately for her at the sight of her smile, unseen by other Slytherins.

"Well... I'm sure you've been hearing about the secret get-together the Slytherins are going to throwing for me tomorrow right?" He asked as his hands managed to sneak themselves around her waist, pulling her slender body comfortably against him.

Hermione blushed, uncomfortable under the eyes of the other students around them and under Ginny's teasing smirk and tried to wriggle away but Harry's arms felt like iron around her waist, trapping her effectively in his arms.

"Er...Yes, I've heard of it...Why?" She mumbled, her brown eyes dropping to the floor in embarrassment as she felt more stares on her. Harry smiled at her and lifted a single finger, using it tilt her chin back up to meet his emerald green eyes. "Don't you dare trying hiding your beautiful eyes from me, Granger." He teased, smirking when Hermione gave him a weak, mock-glare, ignoring the way Draco had rolled his eyes in disgust at them.

"Anyway... As I said...For this party, we're supposed to be asking a date...Of course, there's no one else here I would rather ask than

you...How about it? Be my date for the party?" Harry asked softly, pulling her closer to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Your date? I'd love to of course but...What about the party? Isn't that like '*Slytherins—Only*'?" Hermione asked lightly, meeting Ginny's eyes for a brief moment before glancing back at Harry's twinkling ones.

Pansy spoke up nervously, her eyes wide in suppressed horror and a fake smile plastered on her face to hide the growing agitation Hermione could see in her. "Um...Yeah, Harry... It *is* Slytherin's Only... Except for the occasional date from Ravenclaw of course...You see, when Lila and I were talking of throwing you a party before the third task... We only meant for it to be private and *exclusive*... N-not that we're telling you what to do or anything but—"

"You said this party for *me*, right Pans?" Harry asked lightly as he and Hermione both turned to stare at her, keeping his firm arm around Hermione's slim waist. Pansy colored and stepped back, looking unsure of how to respond.

"Well, yes, technically, it *is* for you, Harry but see, when we said we were going to throw a small party, we meant it to be mostly *Slytherins* only so..." Her voice trailed off and she looked to Lila for help, becoming flustered under Harry's irritated glare.

"Oh yeah? You said all of us should bring a date...? What about those who will be coming from Ravenclaw? I'm pretty sure not everyone is going to be bringing a date from our house, Pansy." Harry pointed out impatiently.

"What Pansy means here is... Um... See, Harry, if we let *one* Gryffindor in the party, won't she feel uncomfortable around all of us? And if we *do* let one Gryffindor in this...Pretty soon, more are going to have to be invited for her to feel more relaxed and soon, the entire Gryffindor house is going to be there—"

Harry raised a hand, nodding and waving Lila's last words away in growing impatience. "All right, all right, all right! I get the picture, Perrine!" He interrupted rudely, rolling his eyes. He turned back to Hermione, surprised to see amusement dancing in her brown eyes.

Then he turned back to give the guys a grin before giving a relieved-looking Pansy and Lila a smirk. "All right then... Since you said we can't invite *one* Gryffindor to the party because she might feel uncomfortable and invite other friends, why don't we invite *two* Gryffindors over so they can keep each other company?" Harry sneered wider at the horrified look in the Slytherin girls' eyes and turned to give Ginny a semi-friendly smirk, uncoiling one hand from Hermione's waist to offer it to the other girl.

"How about it Weasley? You want in the party tonight? I could use another beautiful girl on my other arm." He asked, holding back a round of laughter as he heard his Slytherin friends, particularly Pansy and Lila gasping in shock behind him.

Ginny surprisingly gave Harry a charming smile of her own, taking the hand he offered her and allowing the Slytherin to lift it to his lips and give it a kiss the same way Theo had, inwardly wincing when she thought she heard Ron choke loudly behind them.

"Why I'd love to be your other date, Potter. Thank you for the invite." Ginny answered, meeting Hermione's smile and giving her friend a wink. Harry gave one brief nod in response, the smirk never leaving his handsome face before he turned and rested his forehead against Hermione's, pulling her closer to whisper something in her ear.

"Be sure to wear something beautiful tonight...Not that it would matter what you wear but just dress up... I have a surprise for you..." He whispered softly, causing Hermione to shiver as his warm breath ghosted over the sensitive spot behind her ear.

"What is it?" She asked breathlessly, her eyelids fluttering shut as Harry trailed gentle kisses on the side of her face, a brief whiff of his now familiar aftershave slightly inflaming her desire.

She felt him smirking against her cheek, his arm moving to tickle her slightly for a moment. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise now would it, Granger? I thought you were smart...Tsk... Definitely Gryffindor..." He teased, causing Hermione to shove him off.

"Of you... Fine! Tsch... I'll be there then...What time...?" She asked, looking up to see Pansy and Lila grumbling to each other. Harry lazily

conjured up a single white rose from his wand, inspecting it leisurely before smirking and placing it into Hermione's hair, his fingers moving to tuck a stray lock behind her ear as he did.

The reactions they got from this were quite amusing actually— Draco rolled his eyes again while Blaise smirked, shaking his head. Ginny giggled and Pansy looked as though she was going to have a cow but Hermione barely noticed, blushing dark red at the tender action.

Harry pretended not to notice, hiding a smile as he reached into his pocket and pulled out two palm-sized black cards with the picture of the Slytherin crest printed perfectly on it in sparkling silver ink. Smirking, he handed one to Hermione and the other one to Ginny, glaring at Pansy and Lila again when the two girls appeared as though they wanted to object.

"Not one word, Pansy...Lila. As far as I can remember, every Slytherin is free to bring a date and it just so happens that I've decided on bringing *two* from *Gryffindor*. It's not a crime is it? You don't mind this arrangement now do you, Hermione?" Harry asked, his glare moving from the two girls to give Hermione a charming smile.

Hermione just smiled back, touched at all the trouble Harry was going through for her just to make sure she could feel comfortable and how gentlemanly he was acting by asking Ginny out. "Of course not, Harry... I'd be happy to share you with Ginny just for tonight." Hermione kidded, winking at Ginny, who laughed in response, inspecting the invitation in interest.

"Tomorrow...Noon at Hogsmeade. You girls meet me by the Prefect's Bathroom at 11:30 so I can bring you to the venue...*Don't* forget the invitations and don't be late... Make sure you ladies wear something appropriate...It'll be a *formal* party." Harry said, winking as he leaned forward and gave Hermione one last lingering peck on the cheek.

"Harry! Hogsmeade?! Won't that be dangerous for you?! Dumbledore would never allow this if he found out and what would Si—*Padfoot* say?! You can't honestly—" She was silenced by another kiss from Harry, this time on the lips as he seemed amused by her concern.



"Don't worry about it...Everything is going to be fine...The party is at one of Draco's owned houses there by the village...We'll be safe, the place is surrounded by magical barriers. And we've already gotten permission from Dumbledore to hold it...He knows about our exclusive house parties at least once a year...And Snape will be there. It'll be safe." He whispered into her ear reassuringly.

Hermione grumbled but couldn't hide the smile as Harry gave her one last kiss on the lips before turning and walking off, the Slytherins all trailing after him wordlessly. She was vaguely aware of the blissful sighs from the girls around them but she didn't care as she watched Harry walk over back to the Castle, her cheeks still flushed from exhilaration.

"Earth to Hermione! Hello?!" Hermione finally cried out in pain as she finally grew aware of Ginny's insistent poking, causing her to rub her sore ribs and give the younger girl an annoyed glare.

"What?!" She snapped, still blushing as Ginny gave her a teasing smile. "You were staring, you silly little girl...Tsk, tsk... Who knew your jerky, conceited boyfriend could be charmingly romantic when he wanted to be? He has such a cute ass too, eh?" She pointed out, causing Hermione to growl at her.

Ginny laughed, raising her hands in defense. "Alright, alright! I was only kidding, Mione! I've got a boyfriend, remember? I won't try stealing your hot boyfriend away tonight." She said, smiling when Hermione visibly relaxed. "Although I have to point out that he has quite the body as well... I mean, did you see those toned abs??" Ginny butted in again, this time causing Hermione to swat her on the arm, both girls laughing.

"*What* was that all about, Ginny?! Hermione?!" A voice suddenly raged out of nowhere, causing both girls to look up and see Ron storming over to them, an irate look in his blue eyes.

"What do you mean, Ron?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow as Ron grabbed Ginny by the arm, his protectiveness getting the better of him again. "Ginny, what the hell were you doing talking to those Slytherin scumbags?! I mean, it was worse enough that Hermione

here is dating him but you have to flirt with him too?!" Ron asked, his tone accusing.

Ginny's eyes widened in surprise. "Flirting?! I wasn't flirting with Harry, Ron! He was just—" She desperately sought for the right excuse before she gulped and turned to Hermione for help, knowing that they couldn't tell the other Gryffindors about the party or for sure, they would be allowed to leave the Common Room.

"I was just introducing them properly...They haven't really met...well...formally... Except for that time in Second year...Remember? He was only being polite after all." Hermione said hastily, not at all liking the way she was lying to her friends once again.

"The day Harry Potter is polite is the day I shave myself bright bald..." Ron muttered under his breath, causing Hermione to glare icily at him. "Besides...It's not *Harry* I'd be worried about for your sister if I were you..." Hermione muttered under her own breath as she saw Ginny eyeing Theodore finally leaving the castle with his girlfriend and heading off for Hogsmeade.

Theodore gave her a charming smile as they passed, not seeing the icy glare Antoinette was sending at them which Ginny was only happy to return. "What do you mean by that, Hermione? And what's that in your hand, Ginny?" Ron asked suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at Hermione's very Potter-like smirk and Ginny's hasty shoving of the invitation back in her pocket.

"Nothing. Come on, Ginny... I believe we something to do...Girl stuff..." Hermione said innocently, grabbing hold of Ginny's arm and yanking the younger girl away before Ron had a chance to question his sister any further.

"We do?" Ginny asked in confusion, blinking as she looked away from Theodore's abs and turned to look at Hermione in surprise, causing the girl to stifle a loud groan and stop abruptly in the middle of a patch of grass near the castle entrance, away from Ron's prying ears.

"Ginny listen to me.... *Forget* about Theo for now...I know he's completely charming and handsome but you've got Michael and if he finds out you're crushing on a Slytherin and in *Harry's* group, you're dead. He's *off-limits*." Hermione pointed out, shaking her head.

Ginny flushed darkly at the direct accusation, shaking her head. "I'm not crushing on him, Hermione! And I know about Michael alright? I know how much he hates Slytherins so I know about steering clear! Sheesh...You so much like my brothers sometimes...Trust me, I'm not going to do anything rash. I'm keeping away from Nott as far as possible, I know that no matter what, those Slytherins will always be trouble." She reassured Hermione, secretly crossing her fingers behind her back.

Hermione nodded, looking relieved but the two of them couldn't help but jump when a drawling voice suddenly spoke up from behind them, causing them to whirl around and see AJ Potter leaning casually against the castle wall with a very smug smile on her face.

"I could easily say the same for *you* goody Gryffindors...What are you two dorks whispering about anyway?" She asked loudly, causing Hermione to give her a death glare that would have sent Prof. Snape running but AJ just met it with a smirk, her eyes twinkling in avid interest.

"Leave it alone, Potter. This is so none of your business..." Ginny snapped at her, her eyes flashing threateningly but AJ didn't look intimidated, smirking wider as she straightened up from the wall and began to saunter towards them calmly.

"Au contraire... *I* think it is... What would happen if I told Theo *or* the other boys about this little secret then, Weasley? Or better yet...Your brothers...Ooh...Won't *that* be interesting..." She drawled, chuckling at the panicked look in Hermione's eyes.

Ginny felt her own rush of panic inside her but easily met her gaze, biting her lip before purposely letting out something in defense. "Well if you do that then I'd just have to tell a certain blonde *jerk* that you've already snogged my older brother a couple of times in the Astronomy tower." She said smugly, immediately causing AJ to redden in anger and shock.

"You wouldn't...You Gryffindor *scum*...How did you know about that...?" She hissed under her breath, her emerald green eyes flashing in challenge as Ginny shook her head, moving to stand beside Hermione. "I'm sure you would know all about the way siblings share secrets, Potter... But don't worry...I'll keep my mouth shut if *you* shut yours..." She said, giving the Slytherin girl a sweet smile.

AJ didn't smile back, her eyes cold and hateful as Hermione shifted uncomfortably between them, not liking the obvious tension in the air. Finally, AJ broke the glare and gave the two of them a disarming grin, rolling her eyes.

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone, Weasley... I was only curious...Besides, like *you'd* have a chance anyway. Theodore only dates *older* girls as you can see...And he's very picky...You'd have to be his EQ equal or something for him to be interested...He's *very* reserved...He's not like any Slytherin I know..." AJ said, stopping right in front of them and getting strange stares from the other students.

"Why do you say that?" Hermione asked, genuinely interested as Ginny snapped her mouth shut and glared at her friend for interrupting her ready insult. AJ grinned at her, momentarily taking Hermione back at the sincerity of her smile yet again.

"The boy's a hidden prodigy.... Not in academics of course, he's quite rebellious as any Slytherin is and he *hates* studying things he's not interested in... I'm talking about those strange, endearing and *mysterious* boy geniuses that you can never fully understand but still find sexy." She said, an uncharacteristic giggle escaping her lips.

Hermione and Ginny both blinked, their eyes widening. "Did you just *giggle*?" Hermione asked, laughing as AJ blushed a dark red in realization. "Shut up... I was only offering information to Weasley over here...Hopefully to let her know that Theo is completely off *her* market." She said again, reverting back to her bitch mode.

Ginny flushed red again, giving her a blazing glare. "I am *not* crushing on him, dammit! I have a boyfriend for crying out loud! How did I suddenly get drawn into this mess all in one day?!" She snapped, giving AJ her meanest glare which AJ returned with a smirk yet again.

"If it helps... Theo's also quite the poet and artist...You should see the works he does...Should keep you on your toes." AJ taunted again, sniggering when Ginny exploded and made to hex her, causing the Slytherin to step back slightly and grasp her own wand in defense.

"Ginny!" Hermione warned, moving to stop the younger girl from trying to duel with Slytherin's most overly-protected princess for fear of not only Harry going all ballistic on her if AJ got hurt but Malfoy as well... She definitely did not want to face that.

Ginny stopped but kept her fuming gaze at AJ's plastered smirk, wanting to rip the annoying smugness from the older girl's features. "Temper, temper, Weasley... So childish...No class at all...How did your family bring you up anyway?" AJ taunted lightly again, causing the redhead to stiffen in anger and Hermione to give her one last glare.

"AJ, just sod off alright?!" She blurted out in frustration, clenching her fist to keep herself from punching her former enemy right in her face. AJ scowled but stopped, her green eyes briefly flickering in regret before she took another step backward, nodding her assent.

"I...I'm....I'm *sorry*." She offered, nodding again at them and keeping her eyes expertly trained on the floor to avoid seeing the slightly surprised look in Hermione's eyes and utterly disbelieving look on Ginny's.

"Whoa...The ice bitch can say sorry...?" She asked bitterly in slight amazement, causing Hermione to elbow her sharply and give her a silencing look before she gave AJ a, hopefully, reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about it, AJ...And thanks for the information. Now come on Ginny, I believe we have to hunt through our closet for what to wear for tomorrow." Hermione said, turning back to the gaping Ginny and making to pull her back into the castle. Halfway there however, they stopped again when they heard AJ's voice calling out to them, causing the two Gryffindors to whirl around and face her with confused looks.

"Are you coming to the Slytherin celebration tomorrow? I see you're holding the invitations..." AJ asked curiously, her green eyes peering

at them with a strange form of hesitant and unsure friendliness so devoid of any mockery, malice or even sarcasm whatsoever that it briefly reminded Hermione of the time she had met AJ three years ago in the muggle zoo.

Hermione smiled back as she shoved the invitation in her pocket, nudging Ginny again as she saw the younger girl gaping at the Slytherin once more and obviously making AJ very uncomfortable. Hermione didn't want Ginny to scare AJ off like that...She was genuinely hoping to become friends with the girl at one point and she was hoping it could start off with the simplest of friendly talks.

"Yes, we will come. Your brother just publicly invited the two of us a couple of minutes ago." Hermione answered, offering a small smile and hoping AJ wouldn't revert back to her mask just for a couple of moments to talk to her. To her relief, she didn't as the Slytherin smiled back, shrugging.

"So...Um...What are you two wearing?" She asked curiously, ignoring the way some of her fellow housemates were giving her disbelieving stares. Hermione looked mildly bewildered. "Er...Perhaps dress robes...I'll have to rifle through my trunk... Why...?" Hermione asked, meeting Ginny's equally confused gaze.

AJ smirked for a minute but this time, it wasn't a smirk of scorn but a smirk of laughter, shaking her head at them. "They said it was going to be a *formal* Slytherin party." She pointed out, once again met by blank, confused stares. "...So?" Ginny asked flatly, giving a shrug.

AJ faltered at the question before answering again. "So? It means it's probably going to be a big event the school will be talking about...Remember our Quidditch Victory celebration in third year? All the other houses wanted to get in." She pointed out again, hoping to get them to understand what she meant. "Oh..." Ginny responded in confusion, raising an eyebrow. Hermione just shook her head.

She sighed, giving them an exasperated look. "Oh you clueless Gryffindors, don't you know what that means?" She asked again, throwing her hands up irritably into the air. "It means you'll need to wear something really flashy and snobby looking... Slytherins *always* love planning these big posh exclusive parties at least *once* a

year...And they like to make it so boring too by making it one of those rich formal gatherings...I swear, they act more like a bunch of old people than teenagers actually but it's a nice way of mingling...I doubt you'd be welcomed dressed up like your usual selves though." AJ said, smirking.

Hermione laughed while Ginny glared at the implied insult, merely crossing her arms over her chest. "One question Potter...Why are you helping us all of a sudden? You hate us remember? And the last time I've checked, you still do...Ever since I could remember..." She pointed out poisonously.

AJ answered her by letting her gaze drop down onto the floor to hide her eyes the same way Hermione had seen Harry do so many times when he didn't want to show her how he felt about something. She watched as AJ managed a weak shrug, forcing out a weak chuckle.

"To be honest...I don't know... Maybe we can say that it's because I'm trying to get you two to like me?" She laughed and shook her head hastily, looking amused at her own excuse. "Call it some late sucking up but yeah... I realize how much of a real bitch I've been these past years and I'm willing to do what I can to change that image of myself... I don't want to be known as that bitch anymore...I've changed somehow...Ever since my...My *sleep*..." AJ's eyes suddenly darkened at the memory but she continued, shaking the thought away.

"I've...come to my senses I think and I noticed just how exactly childish I was for these last three years." She explained softly, keeping her eyes on the ground for fear of seeing the look of absolute surprise on the other girls' faces.

"I mean...Hanging around with girls like Pansy and Lila...Bullying everyone around...Yeah, how thick could you really get huh? I somehow just grew sick and tired of all that shallow, senseless rubbish...I can't believe I even enjoyed it before...Hell, I can't believe I was even that person before...It seems that the person I was before is a complete stranger to who I am now...It's weird." AJ explained softly, unaware of Hermione's softening gaze.

"Look at me...I'm babbling...Maybe I'm just lonely for a bit of real female companionship...I want to help you two..." AJ offered, looking up and giving them a smile again. "You don't get companionship from Perrine and Parkinson?" Ginny couldn't help asking, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Hermione glared at Ginny when AJ's eyes darkened again, another sneer reappearing on her face. "Those *aren't* friends... They never were friends to me. I have a few changes and they turn their backs on me...That's *not* friendship. It was all gibberish with them...All fun and games...No real friendship between us...I'm just sorry I was only able to see through their fakeness *now*... Though *how*, I don't know..." AJ muttered darkly, her hands clenching as she slowly sank to the grass, crouching down to avoid their eyes.

Hermione walked over to her and bent down, placing a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder, causing AJ to stiffen in surprise and look up at her. "Maybe because you never really *were* like them in the first place, AJ... And I'm glad you aren't... You're just like what you said about Theo you know...You aren't like any Slytherin girl I know as well...You're *much* better than they are." She said, offering a hand to her.

AJ stared at it for a long time almost as though she couldn't believe what was happening before she grasped Hermione's arm, allowing the Gryffindor to pull her up onto her feet. "Now... You said you were going to help us with our clothes right? How do you plan that?" Hermione asked, suddenly grinning in growing excitement.

AJ stared at her but nodded, turning to offer a hand to Ginny as well, giving the redhead a sincere look. "Truce, Weasley?" She asked, the corner of her lips lifting into a slight half-grin.

Ginny didn't look as though she was going to accept at first as she opened her mouth to say something no doubt rude and sarcastic but at seeing Hermione's warning glare she stopped and sighed, meeting AJ's eyes. "Very well... *Truce*..." Ginny said hesitantly, taking the offered hand and giving it a firm shake.

"But don't think I trust you, Potter...You have a long way to go before you earn that..." Ginny added hastily, narrowing her eyes as AJ only



nodded in response, her grin almost amused. "Likewise, Weasley... I don't really expect you to." She told her as her eyes slowly traveled back to Hermione, snorting out loud when she saw the white rose in her hair.

Seeing this, Hermione instantly took out the rose and blushed darkly, glaring at AJ while Ginny looked between the two of them repeatedly, looking confused. "Aren't you going to offer Hermione a truce?" She demanded in anger, glaring at the Slytherin again but AJ only raised a hand and waved her off, shaking her head.

"Ms. Granger here and I have already settled our differences a couple of weeks ago... We're on civil terms now...Aren't we, Granger?" AJ asked lightly, almost breaking out into a smile when Hermione nodded in response.

AJ returned the nod before slowly smirking and turning around, feeling the other girls' eyes watching her in confusion as she slowly began to make her way to the village. Just as Hermione had opened her mouth to ask her why she was leaving, AJ turned again, raising an eyebrow at them.

"Well...? Are you two coming or not?" She asked as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, checking her watch impatiently as she did so. "Where?" Hermione asked in utter bewilderment as AJ rolled her eyes, gesturing to Hogsmeade behind her.

"To Hogsmeade of course...Where else are we going to find something to fix the two of you clueless Gryffindors up for tomorrow? Honestly... I'd almost think you Gryffindors are as dumb as you look..." AJ commented lazily, causing Ginny to give her a warning glare.

"I'm warning you, Potter...One more wisecrack comment and I'll pop you one..." She said darkly, causing AJ to chuckle as Hermione looked at her again. "But... Why Hogsmeade? Ginny and I both have perfectly good dress robes for formal occasions back at our closet, I'm sure that would be enough. It would be impractical to spend something just for one sudden party." Hermione pointed out, looking incredulous.

AJ was now tapping her foot impatiently, checking her watch once again before turning to give the girls a miffed look. "*Look...We don't have all day you know so can we please get a move on? I mean, do you even know what this party is going to be like, Granger?*" AJ asked again, this time looking directly at Hermione.

Hermione flushed and shook her head, looking unsure of herself. "Er...Not really... Isn't it going to be just like one of those parties like Gryffindor has whenever we win a Quidditch match?" She asked, shrugging.

AJ looked at her as though she had just admitted to having a crush on Crabbe and Goyle. "*Granger, you forget...This isn't only a normal Slytherin gathering... It's the last gathering for the year before the term ends...And not only that but it's going to be thrown for Harry meaning its probably going to be worthwhile...Like the party they threw last year after we won the Quidditch cup.*" AJ explained pointedly.

At being met with blank nods again, she let out a sigh of frustration, running her fingers through her hair.

"Don't you two see what that means?! Slytherin is *filled* with the richest heirs of nearly all the high pureblooded families in England! They're going to make sure this party is *really* reserved! It's almost like the Yule Ball all over again! And knowing Pansy and Lila, I'm thinking they're going to *accidentally* let slip this party to other houses just for the opportunity of letting them know that the party is exclusive...Apparently, it's supposed to be an '*honor*' to be given the job of planning the party and they're thriving in that fact..." AJ tried to explain, relieved to finally see the understanding of the other girls' eyes.

"To be honest, I hate these stuffy parties and I'd miss them if I could but they said that it was a tradition or something...Passed on from generation to generation. The professors know about it of course and permit it since they really can't do anything about it...It's not exactly against the rules." AJ concluded, finally breathing in a breath of air and smirking when she saw Hermione's wide eyes.

"Why can't you Slytherin pricks ever make life simpler? All this trouble just for a party..." Was all she said before groaning at the excited twinkle in Ginny's eyes, the redhead beginning to bounce up and down as she clung onto Hermione's arm in anticipation.

"Oh my god...Hermione, we're actually invited to go to this thing! And as escorts of the guest of honor no less! Oh Merlin, what the hell are we going to wear?! All the hottest boys in school are going to be there!" She started raving, jumping up and down as AJ couldn't help but laugh at the youngest Weasley's antics.

Hermione's eyes were as wide as saucers as she tried to take in everything AJ said, not wanting to believe that the Slytherins would go through such extremes, not to mention waste so much money, just to flaunt themselves to everyone else. "Holy Merlin is right...AJ, when did this thing start? How come no one's mentioned it to *us* until now." Hermione asked, her voice cracking.

AJ grinned, shrugging as she leaned closer to whisper something to them. "I'm not really sure...Perhaps you just haven't been *interested* in Slytherin traditions until now." Hermione blushed at AJ's smirk. "Anyway, if it helps, we *rarely* talk of it at all unless the party's already approaching...It's a *private* event after all. I don't know much...I've never been '*given the honor*' of planning the party yet..." She said sarcastically,

"Don't worry about it though...Snape will be there to supervise us so nothing bad is bound to happen. Besides, it's in *broad daylight*...How can anything happen in front of such a crowd? It's perfectly safe...I'm even surprised you haven't known about it until now." AJ told them, offering a shrug.

"Not exactly...I *did* hear of some snobby party being thrown by you Slytherins every year but I didn't know it was something like this...I thought it was just like some small celebration or something. *All* houses have mini-celebrations occasionally right?" Hermione reasoned, marveling at her ignorance.

"And you think we'll be breaking tradition by being the only Gryffindors there?" Ginny asked excitedly again, her eyes sparkling at the thought. AJ laughed again, nodding at her. "Yeah...Pretty

much... I don't really mind...These events are usually boring anyway... Having you two there might spice things up a bit..." AJ admitted, glancing back to a hesitant Hermione again.

"Well I'm not so sure, AJ... It seems awfully risky...And I don't want to intrude on house celebrations...What if the other Gryffindors find out we've been at a Slytherin party? Plus, the knowledge that we're going to be the only Gryffindors there is not exactly comforting...From what I know...Your house is filled with bloody dark wizards...Ron, Seamus and the others would never allow it if they found out. And you and Harry...Isn't it dangerous for you to be out these times...?" Hermione started ranting, more to herself than to any of the other two.

AJ merely snorted at her worries while Ginny grabbed onto Hermione's arm, spinning the other girl around to face her. "Come on, Hermione! You've got to learn to live a little! It's not always about the rules you know! And my brother doesn't have to find out... What they don't know won't hurt them right...? Come on...Just this once, be willing to get into a little trouble...I can't go to this thing without *you...Please...?*" Ginny pleaded, all but kneeling on the floor and begging her friend on her knees.

"And don't worry about *us*, Hermione. Prof. Snape is going to be there to *'protect'* Harry and me...That's probably the reason I'm suspicious of Dumbledore...I think he assigned Snape to watch us the entire party." AJ added, trying to ease up Hermione's worries.

Hermione finally sighed and reluctantly gave in at that and at the insistent look in Ginny's eyes, knowing full well that the reason her younger friend wanted to be there was that she wanted to see a certain blue-eyed Slytherin of her own. Ron was going to kill her...

"Fine...Potter...Where exactly are we going in Hogsmeade?" Hermione agreed, ignoring Ginny's wide grin and turning to AJ again as once again, the Slytherin gestured for them to follow her. "Where do you think? I'm taking the two of you to a robe shop so you can get your new dress robes... Hopefully we can do something to make you fit in..." AJ answered, checking her watch again before walking off.

"New dress robes?!" Hermione asked in shock as she struggled with Ginny, who had promptly begun dragging her off after the raven-

haired Slytherin, ignoring the stares they were receiving from the other students around them.

"Did I see right? Did Hermione *and* my sister just go off with *AJ Potter*?" Ron asked Seamus loudly from the other side of the field. All he got in return was a smirk and a nod, causing him to stare off at the direction the three girls had headed, knowing right away that something was up...

As soon as the three girls were out of the other students' sight, AJ began leading them into the remote part of the village, taking great care in keeping her face from being seen by the curious villagers nearby.

"I have a question...What's with the snobby-looking invitations and why does it have Potter's signature at the back...?" Ginny asked loudly as AJ led them into a boutique at the very end of the village, trying in vain to ignore the weird stares they were getting at being seen together.

AJ turned to glance at her briefly, raising an eyebrow. "Oh that's just for privacy reasons... You need it to enter the party if you're not from Slytherin. It'll certify the others that you were especially invited by the Slytherin who signed the invitation. Otherwise, you're just another hankering loser trying to get in..." AJ explained shortly, pushing through the glass doors to enter the store.

"Did anyone ever *try* to get in?" Hermione asked curiously as she followed in after her, her eyes widening at the expensive-looking robes around them. AJ shrugged, looking slightly thoughtful. "Crabbe, Goyle and some other *big* guys are always guarding the entrance...But I'm not sure...I'm not exactly the expert on stuff like that..." She said, immediately heading over to a rack of black velvet robes.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked in shock, wincing as AJ held up a black dress robe at them. "What? Don't you like it?" AJ asked, raising an eyebrow irritably as Ginny laughed, taking the robe from her hand and setting it back where she found it.

"Black isn't Hermione's color...She's more of a light-colored type of girl." Ginny told her as-a-matter-of-factly, causing AJ to smirk at Hermione's slightly flushed face. *I cannot believe I am actually shopping with AJ Potter...A couple of months ago, we would have been at each other's throats if we were this close.* Hermione thought, shaking her head and trying hard not to laugh at the situation.

"What the bloody hell is so funny, Granger?" AJ asked in a low growl, setting back another robe on the rack beside her in annoyance before turning back to face her. Hermione just gave her a bright smile, offering a shrug. "It's nothing... It's just that... Right before the school year started, we were well known mortal enemies...We hated each other with a passion...Every time we saw each other, people would literally wait for the two rivals to start their expected brawls...But *now*...We're actually *shopping* together and sharing clothing preferences...it's just...*funny*..." She said, laughing again.

AJ glared at her, clearly not amused but winced in irritation when Ginny began to laugh beside her as well, causing her to flush darker in anger. Pretty soon, both Gryffindor girls were laughing so hard that even AJ had to crack a small sideward grin, shaking her head. "I'll never understand Gryffindors..." She muttered under her breath, sighing deeply.

Hermione laughed again but shook her head and placed a gentle hand on AJ's shoulder, causing the Slytherin to squirm and look at it uncertainly as though she had never seen it before. "I think I like *this* scenario better...AJ..." Hermione said softly, offering her former enemy a friendly smile.

AJ didn't answer her but offered a small smile back of her own, her eyes lighting up with a sense of warmth that Hermione never thought she would ever live to see. "As much as I want to disagree with you, Hermione...So do I... Strange how much a silly little bet can do to change things isn't it?" She said wryly, causing the other two to laugh.

"Can I help you three ladies?" A deep voice suddenly asked behind them, causing all three girls to jump in shock and turn to see a kind-looking elderly woman peering down at them, her eyes twinkling as she eyed their youthful faces.

AJ immediately smiled back, her eyes lighting up in familiarity as she nodded at the woman, gesturing to the other two girls next to her. "Good day, Madame Regina... I was hoping you could help me out here..." She said, giving the older woman a pointed look.

Madame Regina nodded immediately, knowing at once what she was talking about. "Ah... A new set of robes, is it, AJ? I swear... You teenagers spend so much money on such occasions... Things were certainly a lot easier in *my* time..." Madame Regina commented as she instantly sauntered to the back of the shop to gather some of the newest robes into her arms.

"Er... So... She knows you?" Ginny asked, smirking in amusement as AJ sat down one of the seats, eyeing the robes eagerly. "Yeah... This is where I usually buy some of my dress robes when we're at school... The others, Harry included, usually buy theirs around the main village in all those flashy, ridiculously expensive designer boutiques but I prefer *this* place... It's quite hidden from everyone else since it's at the end of the village but it has *beautiful* and much more elegant robes which you don't have to foolishly spend so much on." AJ told them, earning a surprised look from Hermione.

"I never knew you to be the practical type, AJ..." She mused, causing AJ to shoot her a smile. "I know... Strange isn't it?" She responded, laughing lightly at Hermione's nod of agreement. "But it's true... the robes are *very* original and *very* beautiful... No one can ever tell the difference." AJ told them, giving them a saucy wink before turning back to see Madame Regina heading back with some of the new arrivals.

After seeing their disbelieving and respectful gazes still focused on her, AJ finally sighed and turned back to face them, rolling her eyes. "Hey... It's not the clothes... It's how the wearer carries them, remember?" She pointed out impatiently but at their silence, she suddenly snapped, glaring angrily at them.

"Contrary to what people believe, I'm not some spoiled little brat... In case you didn't know, I've been raised by abusive muggles *with* my brother all my life. Our lives are not as perfect as it seems. Though we *are* Potters, we didn't grow up as the bloody royals of some

bloody manor...So yeah...I'm sorry if I disappointed your expectation of me being some self-centered bitch." AJ said bitterly, turning away from their gazes.

At that, Hermione stepped forward and shook her head, giving the Slytherin a remorseful gaze. "No... AJ, *we're* sorry... We should have never judged you like that from the beginning... We had no right to stereotype you as such just because you were in Slytherin or a 'Potter'..." She said softly, offering a smile.

AJ sighed and nodded, turning back to look at Ginny's similar look of apology before waving it away. "Forget it... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to blow off like that...And for what it's worth, I'm sorry for judging you two as well... I don't mean to be a hypocrite with my words, after all." She kidded lightly, causing the two to allow a laugh.

"This one just came in yesterday, AJ...Would *you* like to try it on?" Madame Regina suddenly cut in, handing a soft robe into AJ's waiting hands. All three girls turned and stared, wide-eyed at the beautiful robe, feeling the silky material between their fingers.

"It's beautiful..." Ginny breathed, her eyes sparkling in excitement as AJ could only smile and nod in response, knowing perfectly well who the robe would be perfectly well on. "Yes...It is... It's perfect for you, Hermione..." AJ said softly, slowly taking the robe out of the robe out of the hanger and lifting it up to the light, admiring the way the smooth surface reflected the beams perfectly.

Hermione, who had been fingering the robe with a dreamy look on her face, suddenly blinked and looked up at AJ in surprise, a look of hesitation on her face. "Oh no...AJ...I can't I... Um... Wouldn't *you* want to wear this? It would look so much better on *you* or...on *Ginny!* I could...I could never wear something this extravagant, I—"

"Anyone ever tell you to be more confident of yourself, Hermione? If you want Pansy and Lila to respect you the way you want to be respected, you should *show* them your place above them...It wouldn't hurt to be more aggressive and show your beauty once in a while you know... It would do you a lot of good." AJ interrupted, still smirking as she waved the robe in front of Hermione.



"Come on, Hermione! Potter's right! You'd look absolutely incredible in this!" Ginny exclaimed, looking at Hermione as though she was crazy and watching as AJ smirked and began dragging Hermione to a nearby dressing room, shoving the robe into her hands.

"Try it on, Granger. Let's see if it fits... And don't worry about me, I already have what I'm wearing for the party... And if you're hesitating because of the price, don't worry...It's on me." AJ offered and slammed the door of the dressing room right in Hermione's protesting face.

"AJ! I can't believe this... You don't have to do this, you know! I could very well pay for this robe myself and...Oh, Ginny! Could you please knock some sense into her thick head?" Hermione argued as she shoved the door of the dressing room open again to see Ginny rifling casually through the robes in Madame Regina's hands.

"Hey if Potter is going to be shouldering all the expenses for this, then I'm going to go all out and buy what I can without thought...You should learn to take advantage of the situation and of a Slytherin's once-in-a-lifetime's stupidity, Hermione." Ginny said pointedly, snorting at the look on Hermione's face as AJ laughed at the implied pun, walking over to more pairs of robes on a nearby stand.

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed, looking completely scandalized but it only made AJ laugh harder, shaking her head at Hermione's uneasiness. "Hey! She's right, Hermione...You should learn to accept a peace offering you know...It's much ruder *not* to. You should *never* pass up a good thing." She pointed out, causing Ginny to smirk and Hermione to flush in realization.

"Well...When you put it that way..." Hermione said, finally allowing a smirk when she glanced back at the mirror in the open dressing room and held up the robe to her body, smiling at herself.

"I wonder if Harry will like this one..." She wondered out loud, causing Ginny to burst out giggling and Madame Regina to look at her in amusement. AJ smirked at the look on the older woman's face, nodding to clear up the suspicion. "Yeah... She meant my brother." AJ told her, chuckling as Hermione's face darkened again and she slammed the door of the dressing room to hide her embarrassment.

"So...The rumors were true? This is Hermione Granger?" Madame Regina asked, causing Hermione to mumble something unintelligent in response. "Yeah... But don't believe everything that Skeeter woman says though...That's all I'm willing to say." AJ responded, looking up as Ginny gestured to a black robe in front of her.

AJ smirked and shook her head, wrinkling her nose. "I don't think so, Weasley...That robe wouldn't do wonders for you, I'm sure of it..." AJ pointed out, causing Ginny to scowl at her and set the robe back down. "How would *you* know? You've only been hanging out with me for what? One hour?" Ginny snapped back icily as AJ turned back to the robes in her arms.

"I don't need a lifetime to know what won't match on you, Weasley... Believe me, you wouldn't want that tacky robe... You'd do better with something *elegant* that'll make you look older." AJ drawled, going through the different colored dress robes in her arms.

Ginny sighed but didn't protest, merely reveling at the scene of AJ actually choosing her clothes for her as the older girl finally smiled in triumph and held up another immaculate robe in front of her, causing Ginny's eyes to widen into saucers.

"Well...?" AJ asked, raising a single eyebrow as Ginny carefully fingered the simple ribbons adorning the classy robe, loving the way the material felt so comfortable on her skin. She laughed when the Gryffindor merely grabbed the robe from her hand and rushed to the dressing room beside Hermione's, eager to put the robe on immediately.

*I can't believe I'm actually enjoying myself with this...* AJ thought, remembering how much animosity and hatred there had been between her and the Gryffindors. She couldn't even remember why she had even started such a petty rivalry in the first place.

*Perhaps I'm just growing up...Perhaps we're all just growing up...* AJ mused, sighing as she collapsed onto the couch in facing the dressing room and waited for the two Gryffindors to step out.

*So why do I feel like there's a complete stranger trapped inside of me that is just waiting to be understood...?* A persistent voice lingered in

AJ's head, causing the Slytherin to shake the thought away and bury her face into her hands...

"Did you ever consider doing something creative with your hair, Hermione?" AJ asked softly as she met Hermione's curious brown eyes through the mirror set in front of them, a handful of Hermione's shower-damp hair in her hands.

It was the morning right before the party and Hermione had been surprised when AJ had offered both Hermione and Ginny to help them with their appearances and hairstyles, the girl obviously sincere as she told them. She proved her sincerity even more now as Hermione was now seated in front of a magically conjured up dresser in the Prefects bathroom with AJ brushing her hair behind her, both girls slightly tense and uncomfortable.

Ginny had yet to arrive but Hermione knew she wouldn't miss this for anything. AJ had been right about the Slytherin party...By the time they had gotten home from Hogsmeade yesterday, the entire population of Hogwarts was talking about it excitedly and some of the other girls were hankering for an invite. It seemed the Slytherins hadn't exaggerated when they said they threw the best celebrations in the year.

Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, on hearing the Slytherins throwing a big party for their champion days before the Final Task, had decided among themselves that they would as well and proceeded to begin announcing their own private parties that weekend for their respective champions. Hermione found it strangely amusing but she didn't comment on it, merely nodding when Lavender had filled her in.

*I swear...The girl has an ear for the latest gossip.* Hermione thought, shaking her head. Even the Hufflepuffs, from what she had heard, were planning to throw their own 'exclusive' celebration for Cedric but Cedric didn't seem all that thrilled, merely nodding politely in acceptance. It seemed they wanted to show support for their champion as well.

Even Ron and Seamus had finally heard about the celebrations and the two had been less than impressed but Hermione knew that they were slightly curious about the Slytherin party. Parvati Patil had a

look of roadkill on her face the entire day and Hermione somehow knew that she was still thinking about how Harry had played her like that in front of everyone. The memory still brought a fire to the other girl's eyes and she had that same look of hatred as well whenever she saw Hermione.

Lavender, of course, had stopped hanging out with her altogether and had begun to hang out more with Hermione—to her surprise—and Hermione found out that the other girl hadn't been the giggly idiot she had thought her to be...She actually cared about Ron and Hermione was going to make sure that her idiotic friend wouldn't let her go. They actually seemed like a sweet couple...

But still...It had taken a lot of persuasion on Hermione's part to get Ron and Seamus to agree to her attending the party... She knew they still didn't trust Harry at all and still thought him to be an evil incarnation of Slytherin himself but after a *lot* of convincing, they finally agreed. Ron, however, had gone *ballistic* when he found out about Ginny going and Hermione had actually thought that there was absolutely no chance of Ginny going to the party anymore until Ron finally agreed on one condition—That he and Seamus were going to be around nearby the venue and if anything went wrong, she was to run out right away.

Hermione rolled her eyes, sighing in exasperation. *Boys...always worrying so much...*She thought fondly, shaking her head. But she wasn't worried...She trusted Harry... And surprisingly, she didn't know why but she trusted AJ... They knew they would never lead them to danger.

"I never thought I'd be doing this..." AJ said out loud as she took out a bag of unused make-up and set it into the dresser in front of Hermione, looking slightly grim. "My other friends gave it to me for Christmas...Taught me how to use it..." AJ admitted, still slightly uncomfortable as her former enemy smiled at her through the mirror.

If Hermione didn't know better, she would have thought that AJ was changing entirely from what she could see...Well perhaps not everyone would notice the changes right away but it was the little things that seemed to take effect...The friendly smiles, the

unexpected moments of gentleness and affection...Hermione barely seemed to recognize her anymore as the girl she used to compete with for the topmost rank in academics.

She didn't want to get her hopes up too soon though of course...She had learned right away from her...*enriching*...experience with Harry that it wasn't smart to assume things about a Slytherin... She knew AJ was sincere but she didn't know if the girl was serious about forming a friendship with her...She could only hope that was the case...The thought of finally befriending the girl she had longed to have as a friend seemed quite pleasant to her.

And if it had actually taken one stupid bet of Malfoy's to have both Potter twins as her friends now then she was secretly glad that he had given Harry the bet in the first place...If he hadn't...She never would have had the chance to get to know him...To...*fall in love with him*...A voice in Hermione finished, causing her to blush rapidly.

"No...Not really...I had it up during the Yule Ball...I wouldn't know what to do with it." Hermione answered softly, noting the smirk AJ gave her through the mirror as she let the other girl run a comb down her damp brown locks again, obviously deep in thought.

"Hmm...Wait...Hold on... I have an idea." AJ suddenly said, her eyes sparkling suddenly as she grabbed her wand from the table in front of Hermione and pointed it at the back of Hermione's head, causing the Gryffindor to instantly tense up in suspicion.

"What—"

"Relax Granger, I'm not going to hex you. I just have an idea for your hair alright?" AJ drawled, rolling her eyes at Hermione's doubtful eyes but Hermione allowed herself to nod, telling herself to calm down as she felt AJ begin to apply a small amount of gel to her hair.

"What's that for?" Hermione asked, curious. "It'll keep your hair glossy... You have very beautiful hair, Granger...You just need to take better care of it...Don't let it become the frizzy mop you had last year." AJ taunted weakly, causing Hermione to stiffen in slight irritation.

AJ noticed this and stopped, meeting her eyes in the mirror to give her a small, sheepish smile. "Sorry...Old habits, I guess..." She suddenly said, sighing before she glanced back at Hermione's hair to avoid her questioning eyes.

There was a long silence before any of the two girls spoke but Hermione was amazed that it was AJ who spoke up first, the Slytherin stopping for a moment to meet her gaze again with imploring green eyes. "Look... I know you and Weasley are both wondering *why* I'm doing this...We've been enemies for so long and about a month ago, we would have loved to tear each other apart...Don't think I don't know Hermione...You're still slightly uncomfortable around me. And I don't blame you...After *everything* we've been through...You have every right to doubt me or my intentions." AJ started, pausing to take a deep breath.

Hermione barely reacted, nodding and waiting for the girl to continue. "I don't expect a full blossoming friendship right away, I'm aware of that. I only want you to know that I'm *sincere* when I say that I apologize for all my past actions. You're...You're my brother's girlfriend now...And as much animosity there was between us in the past, I want to put it aside...Because I know it would mean a lot to Harry. I love him... And I want him to be happy... *You* seem to make him happy..." AJ admitted though Hermione sensed a small amount of bitterness in her voice.

"And I...I want to thank you for that. For showing him what a real relationship is... He needs someone to love him...Not someone to ogle at his looks or bloody scar. You know what I mean...And because of this, I...I have deep respect for you. I know it may seem impossible now but...I...I was hoping we could be friends when you find it in your heart to trust me." AJ continued, sighing as she ran a hand through her hair.

Hermione couldn't prevent the touched smile forming on her face if she tried. Finally hearing AJ proclaim her sincere acceptance of their relationship was something she had never expected to hear but it took such a heavy load off her chest...

"I'm not forcing you to, of course...And call my helping you through all this sucking up but believe me when I say that I truly had fun with you two yesterday...And I hardly have *fun* anymore...So...*Thank you*. It must be wonderful...Being able to develop such strong, genuine bonds of friendship...I envy you, Hermione...I really do." AJ admitted, another bitter laugh escaping her lips.

Hermione blinked, not daring to believe her. "You do? But...I always thought that you despised me... You've done nothing but prove that point to me these past three years." Hermione pointed out, fusing her eyebrows together.

AJ shook her head, sighing again and finally raising her eyes to allow Hermione to see the pure vulnerable look she had in those green orbs. "I've *always* been jealous of you, Granger...You're bloody *perfect!* Everything *I'm* not and will never be and I hated you for that! You're pretty, you're at the top of the year, you're nice and everyone bloody *loves* you! What more could you want?!" AJ snapped harshly, looking away.

Hermione's jaw dropped open in brief indignation. "Perfect?! I am *far* from it, Ms. Princess of Slytherin!" She exclaimed, looking slightly annoyed. AJ snorted, giving her a pointed glare. "Yeah right...You've managed to top me in every single subject ever since first year...You were every teacher's bloody favorite...You had all those wonderful supportive friends you while I was only around mostly Harry, Blaise or Draco...You have a loving family to come home to every summer... I've *always* been jealous of you... Why do you think I torment you so much?" AJ confessed again, looking ashamed of her own words.

Hermione couldn't respond, merely staring at her in complete understanding and realization. She understood now... AJ wasn't the snotty little bitch she pretended to be so much around other people...She was exactly like *she* was...And hell, the girl had even envied her...The situation seemed hilarious if AJ wasn't so darn serious about it.

"I...I never knew, Potter...I.../I've always envied you." Hermione said slowly, her voice filled with incredulity as she spoke. AJ looked up, her eyes wide in surprise. "Me? What could you possibly envy about

me? This stupid scar on my forehead?" AJ asked poisonously, angrily scraping at the offensive mark but Hermione shook her head fiercely.

"No. I've envied you because of your remarkable *strength*, AJ...Like I said before, you're unlike any Slytherin I know...And I envy you because of that. You're smart, you're charming, you're beautiful...And you *do* have a loving family AJ... A brother...A *twin*...I've always wanted a sibling myself...And I envy the strong bond between you and Harry. He really loves you...I can tell...And *I* can never change that or take his love away from you... Twins really are amazing..." Hermione told her softly, watching as AJ's eyes glistened at her words.

"I...I guess I'm sorry I ever doubted him..." She whispered more to herself than Hermione, a light laugh coming from her as she hastily wiped her eyes before any tears fell.

"You should be. I'll tell you now, AJ... I don't intend on stealing Harry away from you at all... He loves us both...In different ways... I'm not competing with you... You should understand that." Hermione told her, knowing from the look in AJ's eyes that that was what the other girl needed to hear.

"I...I hadn't realized it...I'm sorry then...I'm sorry because I actually hated you for it at some point...Forgive me." Was all AJ managed to say, another tear escaping her eye and falling down her cheek.

Hermione just nodded in acceptance, pretending not to notice the stray tear. "You don't have anything to be ashamed about, AJ. You're a wonderful person...And I would be glad for the opportunity to get to know you more...To revert from your enemy to your *friend*. It would be an honor." Hermione told her, now smiling at her as AJ could only smile back, her eyes shimmering as she wiped the tears away again.

"I—I...You're such a melodramatic prat...!" AJ kidded weakly, trying to change the subject as she turned away to wipe at her eyes again but Hermione's smile turned into a teasing grin. "I can see why even such a conceited, selfish jerk like Malfoy is falling all over himself for you. You're the only one who seems to tame him...Now *that* makes you one of a kind." Hermione teased, causing AJ to flush immediately, obviously caught off guard.



"Drop it, Granger." Was all she said, causing Hermione to burst out into laughter at the dark flush on the other girl's face. Hermione's smile suddenly turned into a smirk that promptly reminded AJ slightly of Harry, causing her to stiffen in anticipation.

"So... Just how *big* is Malfoy's ego really, AJ?" Hermione asked in a slow, Slytherin-like drawl, this time causing AJ's eyes to go so wide that Hermione thought she was in a state of absolute shock.

"*Fuck* off, Hermione!!" AJ hissed loudly just as Ginny entered the empty Prefects bathroom, causing Hermione to burst out into loud giggles again, nearly falling off her chair. "Hey...What did I miss?" Ginny asked curiously as she hung her new robe nearby before sitting into the conjured chair next to Hermione.

Hermione smiled at AJ's slight uneasiness, nodding to show she understood. "*Nothing*. So...AJ... Care to tell me what Harry's big surprise is all about?" Hermione asked, trying to change the subject at the sight of AJ's face—which was almost as red as a tomato.

AJ shook her head, trying to put up her cool mask on again as she turned back to styling Hermione's brown hair. "He wouldn't say...He said it'll be at the celebration tonight. I'm rather curious myself." She admitted in a calm tone of voice, her face nearly back to its normal nonchalance.

Ginny's eyes widened when she caught sight of Hermione's hair, a smile lighting up her face. "Hermione, you look gorgeous with that!" She exclaimed as AJ continued to flick more spells on her hair, finally causing Hermione to look up at herself in the mirror and take notice of her hair for the first time, her own eyes widening in surprise.

She looked...She looked beautiful. Even someone as humble as herself would admit it... And now, as AJ stood in front of her and began highlighting just the corner of her eyes to enhance the beautiful brown orbs beautifully, she knew that the day was just beginning.

"If I didn't know better, Potter...I'd say you knew exactly what you were doing." Ginny said, causing AJ to smirk back at her for a brief second before turning back to doing Hermione's eyes. "You

underestimate me, Weasley." She taunted back, eyeing Hermione for a long moment before moving to work on her other eye.

AJ didn't really put that much make-up on her as she worked and pretty soon, the Slytherin had finished and had gestured for Ginny to take the new seat in front of her, giving Hermione one quick glance-over once again.

"Hold on..." She murmured, flicking her wand several times at Hermione's form again until she was satisfied, smirking at her in satisfaction. "That's better... I want you to *sparkle* tonight, Granger." AJ drawled, giving Hermione a discreet wink before turning to Ginny's hair.

Hermione smiled at AJ's now slowly warming ease towards her and turned to survey her reflection in the mirror, now smiling widely as she inspected the changes. *Ginny wasn't kidding...* She thought in silent agreement, her eyes not wanting to believe what she was seeing.

"Some advice for the party later, Granger—*don't* fidget. Also...try walking with your head held up high and not looking as though you're ashamed of whom you are... Muggleborn or not, you deserve just as much respect here from anyone... I cannot believe I just said that..." AJ said, gesturing to the robes Hermione had hung behind her.

"Now go get dressed...Remember—exude more confidence in yourself...Especially since this is your first night going *public* as a date in front of the whole Slytherin house... You'll need to fend off scathing looks." AJ said as Hermione nodded, still staring at herself at the mirror in amazement.

"You're telling her to act like one of your kind, Potter?!" Ginny suddenly snapped, her eyes narrowing in accusation but AJ shook her head hastily, looking mildly annoyed. "No. I just meant show charm and confidence. *Charisma*, Weasley...*Charisma*. People respect *confident* people...It's a rule in life. You should also try flaunting once in a while...I'll only say this once, Granger...You've got a hell of a *lot* of beauty but you don't even bother to show it...No wonder you're such an easy target for mockery." AJ scoffed, causing Hermione to glare at her.

"Look...All I'm saying is don't be afraid to show people you're beautiful... That's not something you should be hiding...There is a difference between showing your inner beauty and flaunting it around arrogantly. And I don't just mean *physical*...Show some backbone as well...Show them what you're made of... It's what I respect in you and you don't even show it much." AJ pointed out.

Hermione looked completely amazed, blinking at her careful analysis. "Wow...Aren't you the expert on this... Since when did you become a morale-booster, Potter...? It almost seems as though you're given this a lot of thought." Hermione kidded, walking over to the mirrored walls and holding her new dress robes up to her body.

It was so unbelievable even until now that sometimes, Hermione had to pinch herself to make sure that she wasn't dreaming and that it was really happening... She was dating Harry James Potter... The guy who she had loved to hate the past three years and the guy who had stood up to all his friends for her...

It was almost impossible to believe how much had changed between them...Though she couldn't deny that the Slytherin/Gryffindor rivalry hasn't changed one bit, she did notice that the Slytherins appeared to be putting off the insults around her...

Hell, even *Malfoy* had stopped taunting her now and usually just left her alone or sneered at her but that was it... And now...AJ was warming up to her...It was amazing. However, it almost pissed her off how the Slytherins sucked up to Harry so much but she couldn't deny that she appreciated the change... It was definitely better than having to go to class with mash potatoes thrown down your shirt.

Sure, Ron and Seamus still had their occasional squabbles with the Slytherin duo but after drama of the entire year, Hermione knew by now that that was unavoidable...Slytherins would always be Slytherins and Gryffindors would always be Gryffindors...No matter what happened... It was just a simple fact of life.

And to her surprise—Hermione smiled as she headed off to the corner of the bathroom and began slipping on the beautiful silk robe, shivering delightfully as the cool material touched her skin— She

wouldn't change anything that had happened for anything... She had no regrets...

*Who knew that I'd actually have to be thankful for Malfoy for setting up that dumb bet?* Hermione thought in amusement, chuckling to herself at the absurdity of the idea as she began slipping her arms into the sleeves, feeling the fabric mold against her slender curves.

*And who knew that a relationship could actually make you feel this happy and this miserable at the same time?* She mused as well, remembering all of the rough moments she had with her Slytherin. *Well...It's over now...It's time to move on from that...We've got a whole new year ahead of us once this year ends...It'll be a great chance to have a fresh start.* Hermione thought, nodding as she finally began zipping herself up.

AJ ran a single hand through Ginny's curly red hair. "Weasley... Did you ever consider straightening your hair and growing it long like Hermione here did?"

Prof. Snape blinked and looked up at the huge clock in Dumbledore's office, his eyes widening slightly as he saw the hour hand finally move to 12. "If you'll excuse me, headmaster...I believe I have some things to attend to." He said hastily, moving to gather up the papers he had been helping Prof. Dumbledore and glancing hastily at his own wristwatch.

Prof. Dumbledore barely moved in response, his eyes still focused on the long parchment in front of him. "Keep an eye on them during the party, Severus." Was all Dumbledore said, keeping his gaze on his work as Snape turned around abruptly to gape at him with wide eyes, looking completely amazed.

"Pardon? *Party*, headmaster?" Snape asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion as Dumbledore finally chuckled and set his moon-shaped spectacles down, looking up to give Prof. Snape an amused look, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Don't pretend Severus... I am very much aware of the traditions you Slytherins have been keeping for years now...And how old am I really?" Dumbledore asked, waving his hand hastily as Snape

opened his mouth to answer him. "No, don't answer that, Severus. Anyway...I know of the party this afternoon...I am quite glad that they are showing such strong support for their champion too..." Dumbledore interrupted, nodding.

Prof. Snape looked confused, eyeing the much older wizard in puzzlement. "And...You don't mind, Headmaster? You don't mind the Potters being around the Slytherins at a private party?" He asked, not being able to hide the smirk on his face. Prof. Dumbledore just turned back to his stacks of parchment, chuckling lightly under his breath. "Just keep the boy safe, Severus...That's all I ask." Was all he said.

Prof. Snape nodded again and made to walk away but his curiosity got the better of him as he stopped and turned to face Dumbledore again, voicing the question Dumbledore was very much expecting him to ask. "'If I may, headmaster, I'm curious...Why do you permit these parties to continue? Surely it would be safer if Potter stayed within Hogwarts grounds until after the Third Task...?"

Dumbledore looked up again and merely smiled, causing Snape to stop his sentence and wait for his answer. "I am certain that *if* Voldemort *is* planning something...He wouldn't be doing it during one of the Slytherin parties he knows so well... If he does, the blame would immediately go to the families of ALL his followers...And he wouldn't want that to happen...*yet*... He's too smart for that... He needs them *out* of prison... *playing* innocent..." He answered calmly, once again amazing Snape with his brilliance.

"No, it would be more fairly logical to attack Harry during the Final Task... Because then the blame could easily be reverted to either the Tournament or the Ministry itself...Lord Voldemort was never a fool, Severus..." Dumbledore concluded, looking at him pointedly before turning back to his work, pretending not to notice the way Snape had winced at the horrid name.

"And the article about—"

"Ah yes...Rita has certainly outdone herself this time...Though I'm rather curious how she is getting all those exclusive interviews with my students lately. No...Leave it be... Responding to such accusations will only give the Wizarding Community more reason to

suspect Harry of being guilty of her charges." Dumbledore answered almost as though he had read the very question from Snape's thoughts.

"Yes...You are right of course...But... If I may ask Headmaster... The rumors... About Potter... His parents...The Prophecy...Don't you think it is about time we told him about—"

"Severus...*Now* is not the best time to inform Harry or AJ of their origins... I doubt it would benefit them at all at such a young age...They would not understand...Patience has always been advantageous to the truth, Severus..." Dumbledore interrupted again, looking slightly abashed by the idea.

"Of course, Headmaster...As you wish...I shall be keeping a close watch on both Potters then...You have my word." Snape promised, keeping his expression grim as he nodded once more in agreement before quietly exiting the room, intent on doing just what he had promised.

**A/N:** ACK!! Sucky! Sucky! Sucky! SUCKS! I really SUCK at ending a story so you guys have to forgive me alright? Endings have always been my problem and right now, that's exactly what I'm dreading...Heehee...Well in any case, I hope you liked the glimpse of Dark Arts training...There will be MUCH more in OotP and A LOT in the 6th AAA. Yes, I'm planning on doing a sixth as well but it'll be entirely mine and NOT JK's plot anymore from there...Frankly because the story will be taking a dark turn after fifth year. You'll learn more about that later on... DON'T KILL ME ABOUT BLAISE AND HANNAH! OO Oh and I decided to include more of Ginny now since she will be a *very* active character in OotP...Figured I might as well start now. Lastly... The Slytherin party came out of nowhere actually but I liked the idea and I will incorporate the traditions into my other AAA stories as well. Okay, I'll shut up so you can read the next chapter... H/Hr fluff warning! **PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO REVIEW!! mwah!**

## Chapter 33- Final Promises

*Where the hell are my dates...?!* Harry thought impatiently as he checked his watch for the third time, glaring in annoyance at the numerous stares he was receiving from all the curious students passing by. Several girls eyed him up and down as they passed, taking in his attire and Harry couldn't help but smirk at that, knowing that they had every reason to stare at him.

He had chosen to wear his signature color—dark green dress robes for the occasion, to emphasize the emeralds of his eyes while his dark hair had been tamed and spiked casually on his head but instead of the usual style, the tips of the spikes had been colored the same shade of green as his robes, creating an image of a cross between pure elegance and cunning danger.

Draco had insisted that he wear the serpent earring he had given him for Christmas for their last gathering of the year and it was now gleaming proudly from his left ear, the same silver as the thick chain of the serpent pendant hanging from his neck. He looked gorgeous...And he knew it.

"Hey Potter." A voice suddenly greeted, causing Harry to turn around and see Blaise giving him a forced friendly grin, his eyes darting around the room. Harry had to grin back, noting Blaise's own deep azure robes and neatly styled black hair.

"Hey...Looking for your date? Oh have you seen Draco and my sister? They were supposed to come and meet me fifteen minutes ago." Harry asked him, glancing around as Blaise thought for a minute, his eyes lingering on the direction of the Ravenclaw dormitories.

"Yeah...Lana McGregor...Ravenclaw. Draco said he'll meet you at the party entrance since he needs to monitor the entering of guests and your sister is coming down right now. She told me to tell you to wait for her..." Blaise answered, giving Harry one last nod before he made to walk off towards Ravenclaw, keeping a hard smirk plastered on his face.

*Lana McGregor...* Harry whistled appreciatively to himself, smirking as he remembered the intelligent leggy blonde Ravenclaw girl that Draco had dated the previous year. Though their relationship had barely lasted a month, he remembered the girl was definitely hot... *Zabini's got a catch...*

Harry just shrugged and leaned casually against the statue of Boris the Bewildered, making sure to smirk at every single student that passed him by in case they made to stare at him in either wonder or awe. To be honest, he was far from how calm he looked...He knew what he had planned for that day and he wasn't certain anymore if he had the courage to do it...

He knew more than anything that he love Hermione...And somehow...He felt a growing need in him to tell her...To remind her once again... He knew wasn't exactly being the perfect boyfriend these past few weeks but who could blame him really? He wasn't that experienced in relationships and with the bloody final task coming up, his time was definitely occupied now more than ever.

And from what he saw, Hermione was being nothing more than supportive for him... Merely trusting him to go off without her and never once ordering him what to do...That was what he loved so much about her...The fact that she let him be the person he still was...She never tried to control or manipulate him the way his past girlfriends did...

*And from what I recall, she's always been the 'giver' in this relationship...* Harry thought in growing guilt, remembering all the times he must have made Hermione cry in this single year alone. He knew he wasn't an easy person to handle...Even *he* could admit to that and he knew even more that he wasn't perfect when it came to relationships...

He admired Hermione for being the only girl who was able to put up with him all through this time... The only girl who ever truly cared about him enough to teach him what a relationship...what 'making love' was supposed to be all about. It all seemed like a dream to him now...All their times together... All their special memories...Their moments...



It was a year that he would truly remember... And now that the year was finally ending, he was determined to finally proclaim to all the people around him...His entire crowd...that he, Harry Potter, was madly in love, with his former rival—Gryffindor muggleborn witch Hermione Granger and that he was enjoying every minute of it.

The bet he had made with Draco at the start of the term was but a mere memory now... It didn't even exist anymore to him. Everything was different now... And he welcomed the changes... He knew there would be more in store for them during their fifth year but he was prepared to fight... Whatever it was... From more insane Parvati Patil schemes to Draco's ridiculous bets... He would face it...

Most of all though, he vowed that he was going to do everything in his power to make up for all the hurt he had caused Hermione *this* year. The train ride...The poolhouse... The lake... So many memories...So much pain... And now...the year was finally ending...

After everything they had gone through...All the tasks, challenges, lessons, dates and homework...The year was finally ending... *Ending...* Harry thought, trying to get the idea to stick in. It had seemed all too quick for him... Especially all the hectic events that have happened.

It was amazing how different they all were from the time when he, Draco and AJ had met up with the Gryffindor trio back at the Quidditch World Cup before the start of Fourth year...*Everyone's* changed...Not just him... AJ...Draco... Blaise... Even the Gryffindors from what he could see...

*Hell...If this is what fourth year was like...I'd hate to think what else would be changing in fifth year...* Harry thought briefly, his eyes widening at the idea. *Well at least there's a bright side...At least I wouldn't have to worry about any more fucking Tournament tasks and having to fight Patil out my bloody pants...* Harry thought, snorting quietly to himself.

"Thinking about me?"

Harry stopped abruptly and blinked his thoughts away at hearing *his* line, glancing up to meet with Hermione's beautiful brown orbs

gleaming warmly at him but Harry barely noticed, his emerald eyes widening and his jaw dropping to the floor in absolute awe.

*Beautiful...* Was all he could think about as he let his eyes travel all over Hermione's graceful form, taking in every inch of her smooth, creamy skin and her delectable features. Hermione noticed this and blushed darkly under his gaze, shifting around from one foot to the other in an obviously uncomfortable shyness.

Harry had known Hermione was a beautiful girl... He had known it ever since he had met the young Gryffindor back in first year even when her hair had been slightly frizzy but now... He could hardly recognize her as that same little bookworm three years ago.

Her now long brown hair, instead of being pulled back like she usually had it during normal days, was now hanging loosely down her shoulders, the glossy straight strands endearing sparkling with silver glitters scattered all over the locks. She had obviously spent more time on styling it as Harry noticed the sexy curls now amidst her back and the way her hair seemed to have an ethereal luster about it that he didn't see during normal occasions... *She's even more beautiful than I remember...* Harry thought wistfully, now regretful more than ever of all the days he had been neglecting her lately.

Her brown eyes were now glowing with happiness and a slight twinkle of warm laughter was emanating from the make-up enhanced features, causing the brown orbs to shine out more beautifully than ever before. In fact, Harry noticed that Hermione's face had been enhanced elegantly with the simplest touches of silver-toned make-up, obviously emphasizing her best features with the lightest shades, giving the Gryffindor a seductive appeal around her.

She barely wore any jewelry at all save for the pendant Harry had given her for Christmas and simple silver earrings that caught the light whenever she moved, dazzling in its own unique sense. Best of all, it seemed, she was wearing sparkling silver dress robes which fit snugly around her delicate curves, the fabric magically enchanted to shimmer every now and then as she moved.

Harry's eyes glistened in desire. "You...You look beautiful, Hermione..." He managed to whisper, finally glancing back up and

meeting her nervous eyes with a genuine smile that reached his normally cold eyes.

Hermione didn't look away, her eyes moving from Harry's shoulder to peer warmly at the figure who had walked up behind him. "Yeah...She turns into a goddess when dressed properly doesn't she, jerk-face?" A teasing voice asked behind him, causing Harry to whirl around and come face to face with his sister, who gave him a loving smile in return.

Harry couldn't have prevented the surprised look on his face if he tried...If he doubted it before...He didn't now...His twin was indeed a beautiful girl...*No...Woman now...Woman...* He reminded himself, returning the smile. She looked stunning—Wearing an elegant rose-colored robe that accentuated her slender form perfectly along with the simplest make-up to accentuate her eyes and delicate facial features. Her hair had been pinned up neatly onto her head by a large silver jeweled clip while some strands had been deliberately left down to frame her face.

A single rose had been magically enchanted into her hair, matching her robe perfectly while her jewelry consisted solely of a pair of silver dangling earrings and the pendant Harry had given her. *Simple and elegant...Just her style.* Harry mused, giving his twin a smile.

"So are you..." Harry greeted admiringly, noticing the discreet wink AJ gave Hermione over his shoulder. His eyebrows instantly shot up into his forehead. "Am I missing something here?" He asked, a grin on his face as he eyed the two girls in amusement and disbelief.

Hermione and AJ smiled at each other again as Hermione shook her head and walked over to him until she put her arms around his neck, drawing him close to rest her forehead against his. "Nothing, Harry...Nothing...People change you know..." She told him softly, caressing his cheek as AJ only nodded in response.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but didn't protest when Hermione placed her lips onto his, giving him a chaste kiss for a brief moment that left both of them tingling in pleasure. "I...I don't...I'm not sure I understand..." Was all Harry could manage as Hermione pulled away.

AJ just rolled her eyes, swatting his shoulder in mock annoyance. "That's because you're a brain-dead loser, jerk-face. Never mind, you'll figure it out some time... Now let's go." She urged, looking around for Ginny.

Within a couple of moments however, the said girl arrived and Hermione once again was awestruck by how much AJ had brought out the best in the younger girl's features. It seemed as though in a single night, Ginny had gone from her normally girlish features to looking like a beautifully grown young woman.

Even Harry had to stare for a few moments in mild amusement as he noted the youngest Weasley's appearance... Deep Lilac robes were on her small but delicate frame while her curly red hair had been neatly straightened and pulled into an elegant French braid behind her with genuine lilies interwoven into the strands. Like Hermione, her eyes have been emphasized, giving her the gaze of a much more mature and experienced woman not of her age while simple gold earrings and bangles finished just about gave the final touch.

Harry whistled appreciatively while Hermione just gave Ginny a smile, her eyes warm. "Looking good, Weasley." Harry taunted but Ginny barely heard him, something clutched tightly in her hands.

"Potter! I think you might want to see this! It just came in right now through the mail..." Ginny suddenly exclaimed, offering Harry a copy of the Daily Prophet. Hermione stiffened instantly while Harry and AJ's eyes both narrowed as Harry began surveying the front page.

### **Harry James Potter—The next Dark Lord?**

*How ironic it would seem, that the very boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, would be the very same one to carry on the intended dark legacy in his place...Writes Rita Skeeter, special correspondent.*

*There have already been numerous accounts and witnesses of Harry Potter's suspicious behavior that proves he is indeed, not the well-known hero we all perceive him to be. Instead, his behavior gives warnings that he could indeed be very well the next Dark Lord to wreck havoc on our unsuspecting Wizarding Community.*

Potter—as his numerous unnamed schoolmates at Hogwarts claim—has been reported to display the crudest, most violent behavior imaginable similar to that of You-Know-Who himself when he was of that age and has also been known to collapse on certain occasions due to certain 'problems' with his scar. Curiously enough, whenever said collapse occurs, an unexpected disappearance or murder would arise at the same said time. Indeed, his scar is a well-known reminder of the downfall of You-Know-Who, but as he claims, the scar may sometimes serve as warning sign as well that You-Know-Who is nearby. Due to the reports of Harry's obnoxious and obtrusive behavior in school and the fact that he resides in the same house as the murderer of his parents, many Ministry officials find this reasoning of his hard to comprehend. To add, your Daily Prophet reporter personally witnessed Harry Potter collapsing in class just last Monday and claiming that his scar was burning too badly for him to continue on with the lesson. However, circumstances be that as it may, it was also overheard that Harry Potter had told his most trusted fellow Slytherin, Draco, just before the said class, that— direct quote: "Divinations. Bloody waste of time." It seems that the boy is somewhat untrustworthy with his words, along with his actions as well...

Top scientists at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries claim that the reason Potter may be claiming that his scar is hurting him is that perhaps his brain has simply been altered by the Dark Lord's attempted murder, causing a constant confusion inside of him that he expresses through his 'scar's burning'. This is of course very well plausible seeing that his sister, AJ Potter, has had no public reports whatsoever of her own scar hurting in such extremities before. It could be the side effect of a little boy seeking for a little attention from everyone around him or even brought about by his nearly desperate need to inflict trouble around him, as influenced by his Slytherin friends no doubt. Clearly, associating with the crowd in the very same house that gave birth to the horror that was the Dark Lord has influenced our very own 'savior' into choosing a path of darkness as well.

As we know it, we could very well be witnessing the next makings of the Dark Lord's successor. "Potter speaks Parseltongue...He sent a giant snake that Malfoy conjured up at me once... He started

*speaking this eerie language I couldn't understand and then the next thing I knew, the snake was right in front me, snapping at my face." Claims a shivering Justin Finch-Fletchley, a Hufflepuff fourth year. "There were a lot of attacks on a lot of muggleborns two years ago and we all personally suspected that Potter was behind it...With the crowd he hangs around with, I wouldn't be surprised...After all...He's the type to do it. We even think he's into the Dark Arts...We've heard a lot of rumors about him and his league of friends." Adds another student—Susan Bones—about her said schoolmate.*

*It seems that Albus Dumbledore, the current headmaster at Hogwarts, has forgotten to mention this little detail as Parseltongue—the rare and absolutely dark ability to converse with serpents—was the very gift that both Salazar Slytherin and You-Know-Who were famous for. A member of the Dark Force Defense League currently stated that "Anybody who spoke parseltongue was doomed to be a bloody Dark Maniac and should be sent to Azkaban right away. A person who talks to snakes is very suspicious since snakes are used in the darkest of magic since the beginning of time."*

*Be that as it may...Snakes, Slytherins, Dark Arts, Werewolves and even Giants—It would appear that our young little hero is somewhat fond of such dark company and danger. Very suspicious indeed.*

*The Wizarding World is hoping that Albus Dumbledore will reconsider young Harry's participation in the tournament seeing that it is possible the boy would resort to using the Dark Arts to his advantage. The boy should be considered 'dangerous' for now until proven otherwise...and it is the responsibility of all to make sure all the champions in the event are safe from any form of danger at all costs. Even if it is from a fellow champion.*

AJ winced to herself and watched cautiously as her brother merely stared at the final words in silence, his eyes not daring to reveal anything he was feeling at the moment but AJ knew better. Slowly, Harry began to crumple the article into a small ball in his fist, his eyes still flat and cold as he tried to calm his growing anger.

"Harry..." Hermione said softly, reaching over to clasp his shoulder in an attempt to keep him from doing anything rash but to her utter

surprise and slight nervousness, Harry's face broke out into a sadistic sneer of amusement, his eyes gleaming alive with malice.

"T-that bitch..." Harry breathed out, laughing hysterically to himself with a scarily vicious gleam in his eyes that caused a shiver of fear to run down Hermione's spine. She didn't like the way he sounded when he said that... She didn't like the way he laughed like that...He almost seemed pleased... Almost seemed *evil* in that sense...

"Harry...I hardly think it's funny at all..." Hermione whispered, watching him closely as Harry tried to stop his hysterical laughing, ignoring the looks he was getting from all three girls around him now.

"Harry, shut the fuck up! This isn't funny, dammit! That Skeeter woman has crossed the line this time..." AJ snapped angrily at him as Harry hurled the article across the hall, shaking his head.

"Forget her... She means nothing... So she's gone off me...It doesn't mean we have to grace her with a reaction...Leave it alone." Harry said carelessly, shrugging before he turned and offered his arms to both Hermione and Ginny, giving AJ a sudden grin.

"So... Shall we?" Harry asked, allowing a charming smile to grace his features which seemed to focus more on Hermione than anything but Hermione had to force her own smile back, clearly disturbed at Harry's odd reaction to the article.

Also...She had a pretty clear idea by now how Rita Skeeter *may* be getting these so-called exclusive interviews but she couldn't be too sure just yet...She needed to catch the reporter in the act first but Hermione still meant to keep her word when she said that she would pay the woman back for all the lies she's been spreading around.

She didn't have time to ponder it though as Harry purposely saw her expression and immediately fought to change the subject, his eyes imploring AJ for help. AJ just met his eyes silently, an unspoken thought passing between them before she nodded and made to speak up again.

"So... Why don't we get going then? I'm sure the party's already started and they're already letting people in...We can't have Mr.

Champion here late right?" AJ supplied, grinning as Hermione nodded and Ginny rolled her eyes discreetly to herself.

Harry gave a wry smile and nodded as he carefully escorted all three girls down the castle towards the Village, stopping every now and then to greet the fellow Slytherins heading towards the village as well. Hermione had to blush on the teasing gazes some of her housemates sent her as she passed them, feeling slightly uncomfortable but at Harry's smile, she forced herself to ignore the gazes, focusing on the boy beside her instead.

Ginny didn't seem to mind the gazes though as she smiled and waved at a very *irate* Fred and George Weasley, both redheads turning to give Harry a look of absolute murder which the Slytherin only returned with a calm sneer of challenge, obviously not intimidated.

Some of the other houses, however, seemed interested in watching as more and more Slytherins exited the castle towards Hogsmeade, all donning formal dress robes in place of the usual uniforms the students wore.

Most of the Hufflepuffs glared at Harry as he passed by them, their eyes widening at recognizing Hermione and Ginny with him but they didn't get a chance to say anything as they could only goggle in awe, amazed at seeing a Gryffindor accompanying a Slytherin to their celebration.

To be honest, Hermione could understand their disbelief. Slytherins usually had either a fellow Slytherin *or* Ravenclaw on their arms as escorts...*Not* Gryffindors... Until her relationship with Harry, Slytherin and Gryffindor were sworn enemies among all the houses...It was amusing really...

"There's the other Weasley and that Irish idiot..." Harry murmured to Hermione so that only she could hear, causing her to nudge the Slytherin sharply in the ribs but Harry just laughed, shaking his head as they passed by a glaring Ron and Seamus hanging out by Hagrid's hut.



It was obvious by the looks on their faces that they were going to be true to their word of keeping an eye out on them outside the party's venue and Hermione couldn't help but groan at that. It seemed her best friends could be over-protective at times... Not that she minded of course.

"Over here then..." Harry urged, leading all three girls down to the more private, affluent sector of the village where the larger houses were located, finally allowing Hermione to see a large house surrounded by a thick iron gate with a green banner containing the words. "Welcome Slytherins!" printed on it in big white letters.

Ginny rolled her eyes at that. "Oh...Gee...That makes us feel *really* welcomed then..." She murmured out loud, causing AJ to smirk in amusement. Harry snorted but didn't answer, guiding them to a rather large, tall-door entrance where they saw a small group of Slytherins stationed by the door, welcoming the guests inside.

Harry eyed them lazily for a moment before he finally saw Draco, who was smirking smugly near the front entrance while being the trained Malfoy heir he was—courteously and properly welcoming the guests one by one into the large estate.

"Is that Malfoy?" Hermione asked, peering at him when Harry had led them over to fall properly in line behind the others to enter the party. Harry nodded, smiling back in greeting as the Slytherins greeted him warmly, giving him occasional pats and slaps on the back.

AJ had to smile as she watched Draco, shaking her head in slight amusement as Draco shook hands with the seventh year Head Girl in front of them before looking up and finally seeing them there, his silver eyes sparkling uncharacteristically with adoration when he saw her.

"Ugly little brat..." He mouthed at her, his smirk growing more affectionate that let AJ know that he was only teasing her but she glared right back at the mock insult. Harry laughed and raised a hand when they were finally in front of him, offering it to Draco.

Draco smirked and nodded, giving him their special handshake before turning to sneer coldly at both Hermione and Ginny, raising a

perfectly sculpted eyebrow before asking. "Invitations then, *ladies*?" He asked in a mocking drawl unlike the courteous tone he had been using earlier, causing both Gryffindors to give him an icy glare.

"Leave them alone, Drac. You *know* they're with me... What's with the outfit anyway? You look like a bloody vicar." He mocked lightly, causing Draco to glare at him and AJ to laugh softly in agreement.

Unlike Harry, Draco had chosen something much more formal for the occasion— A purely black, glossy velvet robe that had a high collar which Draco left stylishly unbuttoned at the neck, leaving the girls with a clear sight of his pale skin. His own serpent earring was hanging from his left ear and Fierros was dangling from a thick chain around his neck, easily seen against the black material of his robes.

"I doubt there's a vicar as good-looking as *me*, Potter. Now hand over those damn invitations, Gryffindorks!" He snapped again and rudely snatched the invitations from the girls' offered hands, neatly stacking it in a pile on the table behind him before nodding and allowing Crabbe and Goyle to open the doors.

"You read that interesting Skeeter article yet?" Draco asked Harry casually as he and AJ both leaned down to sign their names the guestbook on the same table the invitations were being stacked. Harry looked up and shrugged, giving Draco a pointed glare. "Leave it...We'll talk about it another time. *Not* today." He said, raising an eyebrow.

Draco only mumbled in response, snatching the pen away from Harry's hands and nodding for them to enter, muttering something under his breath again. "I swear Malfoy...You have *no* true elegance at all with your rudeness." Hermione pointed out, smirking right back the same way Harry himself did, causing Draco to look at her in disbelief and Harry to grin at his reaction.

"Yes... Too true...Well come on then, girls..." Harry said merrily, giving Draco a wink and slapping his best friend on the back again right before entering the large, overly-decorated room, Ginny and Hermione still hanging off his arms with wide eyes as they entered.

Draco merely muttered something rude in response, causing AJ to roll his eyes at him. Just as she made to pass him and follow after her twin, however, Draco smirked and used a single hand to block her path, turning her to face him with a smug smile on his handsome face.

"Invitation, young lady?" He taunted, causing AJ to stop and look at him in utter bewilderment, her eyebrows fusing together on her forehead. "Excuse me? I believe I don't *need* one, you stupid vicar." She snapped back in annoyance but Draco only chuckled and pulled her closer, pressing their foreheads together.

"Tsk...No invitation...No entry... But... I guess we could work something out..." He murmured seductively, his warm breath ghosting over her lips as AJ smiled and leaned in to catch his lips in her own, her arms going around his neck.

"Name your conditions..." She murmured back against their intertwined lips but Draco didn't bother to respond, merely deepening the kiss and pressing their bodies closer together for more contact, waving the next amused Slytherins in to sign and enter.

*Bloody hell...* Was all Hermione could think of as she eyed the large ballroom in utter awe and astonishment. It seemed to her that the house had been magically enchanted to be about thrice as big as it looked on the outside and to her surprise, the inside wasn't anything but a huge party room made especially for hosting events such as this one.

*I guess being a Malfoy does have its privileges...* Hermione kidded herself lightly, smiling when Harry leaned over and gave her a brief kiss on the cheek, his eyes watching her explore the room.

"Beautiful huh? This house was actually specifically designed for parties... Draco's told me he and his family have dozens of party venues like this established all over Europe. This is only one of the smallest..." Harry told her, rolling his eyes.

"Smallest? Merlin, this place is amazing." Ginny admitted beside him, her eyes wide as she took in her surroundings, noting the sparkling glitter enchanted around the room and the single large table set in the

end of the room slightly smaller than the size of house tables in the Great Hall.

Around that, several smaller tables lay scattered around the room, some already filled with Slytherins chatting and conversing with one another while a group of wizards and witches, obviously the hired band, were already setting their instruments in the center of the room.

Hermione glanced at the dance floor, noting the way her face was easily reflected on the glossy marble surface and the beautiful magical lights enchanted to give the room a beautiful glow.

A large banner hung suspended in mid-air bearing the word, "Slytherin" in bright letters while Hermione noted that several house-elves circled the room with trays of food in their hands. At that, she couldn't help but scowl at the idea of Malfoy owning so many house-elves just for his family's expense...It was disgusting how they treated such amazing creatures...*Hmm...I'll have to berate them on House Elf rights soon...* Hermione thought to herself, considering the idea carefully before looking around again.

She tuned Harry out purposely as she heard him begin conversing with some of the Slytherin boys who had approached them, her eyes still wide on her surroundings. The walls all around the room had of course, been enchanted as well, and it appeared that the Slytherins held true to what they said about holding the best parties as the entire room shimmered with a beautiful dazzle, the humongous chandelier right in the middle of the dance floor perfectly reflecting off the sparkles.

"Mr. Potter." A calm drawl erupted behind them, causing them to whirl around and see Prof. Snape giving Harry a calm smile, his eyebrows raised in obvious amusement at seeing the two girls on his arms.

Harry smiled back with equal ease, giving his Head of House a respectful bow of respect. "Professor Snape... It's an honor to have you here with us today, Sir...We thought you wouldn't come especially since you didn't last year...I hope...The party is satisfactory so far...?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow as Snape merely smirked, nodding and raising his goblet to his lips.

"Yes...Well...The Headmaster has convinced me that it would be best if I attended *this* year for...*Safety precautions*..." He said in a strange tone of voice, his eyes meeting Harry's before looking away again to check his watch. "The party is fine, yes...I am pleased that you are all behaving yourselves well as I have taught you...Though this year has been rather...entertaining...I can say that none of you can ever disappoint me anyway." Snape told him before taking a quick sip of wine.

Harry grinned at that, ignoring the exchange of looks of dislike between Hermione and Ginny next to him. "Thank you, Professor...That means a lot coming from you...Will you be staying for the entire evening?" He asked, his eyes curious but Snape shook his head, his eyes roaming the room.

"I will be leaving early, Potter...Several...*arrangements* I have to see to..." Snape's eyes darkened lightly at that but he continued, easily masking his emotions. "Plus...I must check with the other teachers for any dangers in the Maze for the Third Task...I trust you will keep everyone in check...?" Snape asked, merely raising an eyebrow but Harry laughed and nodded, raising his goblet in agreement.

"Of course, Professor. You know me...*Always* reliable." Harry smirked, his eyes twinkling but Snape returned the smirk, nodding before going off to talk to the Slytherin Seventh Year students across the room.

"Hermione...Don't look now..." Ginny suddenly whispered in her ear, causing Hermione to blink and turn to see Pansy and Lila walking over to them in respective robes of black and crimson, both girls with sneers directed at them.

Ignoring Hermione's own unafraid smirk, they turned to Harry, immediately cooing as they spoke. "Harry, baby! You're finally here! How do you like the party so far?!" Pansy cooed, her eyes sweeping over Harry's form seductively but Harry barely looked at her, his eyes reverting to glance back lovingly at Hermione. Ginny smirked at the fire in Pansy's eyes but Hermione felt her heart melting at the affectionate gesture, returning the look.

"Well... I have yet to enjoy the use of the dance floor Parkinson...But then again, I have to say that you and Lila did a wonderful job... You girls certainly have outdone yourselves." He said lightly, turning back to give the girls a small smirk.

Pansy looked delighted at the praise while Lila smiled smugly in response, raising the goblet of cider to her lips. "We're glad you like the arrangements...And um...You two...*Hi...*" Lila said stiffly, her carefully made-up eyes sweeping over Hermione and Ginny in utter, unflattering disbelief, marveling at their appearance.

Hermione nodded back, offering a forced smile. "Hi, Lila...I must say that you two look quite lovely tonight. Thank you for the invite." She offered, nearly smirking when Pansy and Lila met each other's eyes before regarding her icily.

"Correction, Granger... *We* wouldn't invite people like *you* or Weasley here... *Harry* was the one who invited you and you should be utterly thankful that he's such a generous, *charitable* gentleman. If it were me, you'd both be thrown out immediately." Pansy sniffed, turning her nose up at them snobbishly, causing Ginny to clench her hands tightly to hold her anger back.

Hermione, however, surprised herself when she only smiled in amusement, knowing that the girls' insult didn't have their usual effect on her anymore. She had to agree with what AJ had said...They were nothing but the nonsense chatters of people who had nothing better to do with their time...It didn't bother her anymore.

"Nice meeting you too. Come on, Harry...Let's go find our seats...Excuse us." Hermione said cheerfully, winking at Harry, who could only laugh in admiration at seeing the utter confusion on Pansy's face.

"That was bloody brilliant, Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed as soon as they were out of ear shot, giving the older girl a high five which Hermione returned with a grin, rolling her eyes. "I only ignored them...They only affect you when you choose to be affected...I just wish they'd grow up for once." She responded, shrugging as Harry smiled and pulled her closer, leaning over to whisper something in her ear.

"Yeah...Amazing... You're incredible...Sexy..." He whispered teasingly, causing Hermione to shiver at his husky tone of voice. Harry chuckled lightly against her ear and pulled her close, his arms moving to wrap around her waist as she leaned into his strong embrace, her back pressing against his chest.

"That's how you look tonight you know...So unbelievably sexy..." Harry added softly, his lips lingering on the sensitive spot behind her ear while Hermione closed her eyes, snuggling against him. "Mmm... Are you going to tell me your surprise yet?" She asked him, placing her hand over the ones he had wrapped tightly around her waist.

She felt Harry shake his head, a sensual chuckle escaping his lips that sent another round of shivers down Hermione's spine. "Later, Granger... Have some patience." He teased, leaning over to drop a kiss on her cheek while Hermione just smiled cheekily in response, rolling her eyes.

Ginny rolled her own eyes at the two of them, obviously amused. "If you two don't mind, I'd like to sit down now please." She pointed out sarcastically, causing Hermione to blush and nod while Harry gave her an irritated glare at being interrupted but nodded nevertheless, reluctantly letting Hermione go and guiding the girls over to the largest table at the far end of the room.

"We sit here... Go ahead and make yourselves more comfortable. I'll be right back alright?" Harry asked softly, turning to give Hermione a gentle kiss on the lips to cut off the Gryffindor's protest.

"Harry! You can't leave us here, all these Slytherins are glaring at us!" Hermione hissed at him but Harry just gave her a grin, raising her hand to his lips to give the delicate limb a reassuring kiss before he headed off towards the direction of the band, which had just begun playing an upbeat song.

Hermione sighed but watched him go, somehow feeling slightly vulnerable now that Harry had left her side but she was relieved to see Ginny plop down beside her on the large table, her twinkling eyes still surveying the room. "Isn't this exciting, Hermione? We must be the only two Gryffindors here." She pointed out, her eyes roaming the room.

Hermione snorted, raising the goblet of sparkling cider in front of her to her lips and taking a long, satisfying sip. "And this is good news because...?" She asked sarcastically, glumly glaring back at the Slytherin girls now sending looks of pure resentment and malice towards them. Their gazes were as clear as the crystals up in the chandelier... *"You don't belong here, Gryffindor."*

Ginny laughed, giving Hermione a rueful smile. "Come on, Hermione! Look on the bright side...You're the most gorgeous girl here and you've got the hottest guy in school wrapped around your finger! What more could you want?" She teased, causing Hermione to laugh in spite of herself.

"Well for one I'd like to be in my room studying for my final exams...Or have all these Slytherins off my back...And for another... I wish they would hurry it on up... That way I can leave this party without punching anyone..." Hermione answered, giggling when Ginny gave her an irritated glare.

She looked back to see a slightly fidgeting Harry still conversing with one of the wizards of the band, the wizard looking mildly amused at what Harry was telling him but was nodding when Harry had given him a sheet of paper, his face lightly flushing with embarrassment when the wizard gave him a grin.

*What's he doing...?* Hermione thought, raising an eyebrow as Harry finally gave the band one last nod before walking away, stopping for a brief moment to pick up a small goblet of white wine from a nearby house-elf before heading over to a group of loud Slytherin seventh year boys Hermione knew were trouble.

The boys all seemed to notice Harry right away though as they patted the popular Slytherin on the back and began to talk about something Hermione couldn't hear, only noting the loud boisterous laughter coming from their group and the gathering girls around them.

She was about to ask Ginny about one of them when a movement at the front of the room caught her eye, causing her to look up and see Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini enter the room at the same time, Antoinette Whittier and a blonde girl Hermione knew as Lana McGregor hanging respectively on their arms.



Hermione couldn't help smiling and nudging Ginny instantly, causing the redhead to turn confused eyes to her. "I'd look at the entrance if I were you..." She whispered, causing Ginny to glance up and blush instantly as she saw Theodore all decked out in dress robes of aquamarine glancing around the room curiously.

It was obvious that the blue-eyed Slytherin hadn't seen them yet as he surveyed the huge ballroom, rolling his eyes at the loud laughter he heard from Harry and his large group of friends while an almost bored expression rested on his handsome features.

Blaise however instantly moved to drag his date over to their seat a couple of places from Hermione, an almost angry scowl on his face as he sat down instantly and ignored Lana's whiny complaints.

Hermione looked as though she was about to go over to where they were and talk to him when she caught sight of Theodore finally walking towards them, his eyes surveying her briefly but coming to rest on Ginny with a look of pleasant surprise on his face.

He paused for a minute to politely grab a small goblet of wine from a house-elf before making his way over to them, his blue eyes set entirely on Ginny's smaller frame. "Ah...New blood... Pleasure to have you two lovely young ladies here." Theodore greeted, offering a hand to them.

Hermione smiled and allowed him to kiss her hand again while Ginny could only shift around in slight nervousness, suddenly feeling very self-conscious of her appearance as he did the same to her, dropping a kiss onto her hand that lasted a bit longer than the one he gave Hermione.

Theo smiled at her nervousness, raising an eyebrow. "And you, Ms. Ginny...I must say...I almost didn't recognize you... Who knew such a shy little bud could blossom into such a beautiful flower like you...?" He said softly, his intense eyes meeting hers.

Ginny finally smiled, her eyes dropping to the floor as she felt Theo survey her appearance, his normally cold blue eyes softening as he took in the French braid, the elegant robes, the carefully applied make-up... He couldn't take his eyes off her...

"Oh stop it, Nott... You don't have to suck-up alright..?" Was all Ginny managed to mumble in embarrassment but winced when she felt Hermione stomp on her foot under the table, causing her to glare at the older girl.

Theo just smiled again, taking a careful sip from his wine before answering. "Interesting choice of words young lady... But really...This look suits you... I find it very attractive actually...I almost didn't recognize you...I can see the hidden woman in a cute girl like you...It's adorable..." He teased gently with a sparkle of fondness but Ginny felt her heart strangely jump in her chest as she found herself *annoyed* at his words instead of melting.

*Young lady? Adorable? Is he playing with me or is he serious?* Ginny couldn't help but wonder, seeing Theo's eyes twinkle again with a hint of affection that she couldn't quite place. Hermione, sensing the silence, suddenly spoke up hastily, trying to draw Theo's attention away from Ginny.

"So...Theo, where's your date? Shouldn't you be worried?" Hermione asked, looking around for Antoinette, finally seeing the girl flirting with some older Slytherins near the entrance. Theo followed her gaze and smiled at the sight, shaking his head.

"She's conversing with some friends... Don't worry about it though...We both know our limitations around other people and I respect her for her independence. Jealousy isn't really necessary if you have nothing to be jealous about you know." Theo answered pointedly, annoying Hermione slightly at the tone of his voice. It sounded to her that he was talking to her the way he would be talking to a five year old child.

"Anyway... Nice to talk to you two again, I'm sure...I hope to see you again later okay? Oh and Ginny, be sure not to drink any wine alright? These parties could get rather... um...*interesting* when the alcohol kicks in...You might not be able to handle it." Theo said, offering a final smile at seeing Hermione's slightly irritated glare and Ginny's look of frustration.

"I'll see you two later...Have fun at the party." Theo finished charmingly before he turned and sauntered back off to claim his date, unaware of the indignant glare Ginny was burning through his back.

"Cute *girl*?! Young *lady*?! Who does he bloody think he is calling me a damn child?! He doesn't even know me for Merlin's sake!" She raged suddenly, slamming a fist down the table while Hermione could only sigh in agreement.

"I honestly wasn't expecting that either, Ginny...I thought for once we had found a *decent* Slytherin guy around but it seems even a charming gentleman like Theo has his Slytherin defects too...In fact, all these jerks have defects. We should have known better." Hermione admitted, slightly chuckling at the irony of the situation.

"Defects?! Hermione, he was talking to us...to you...to *me* like he was talking to a bloody child! He's worse than my brothers! He doesn't have any damn right to act so high and mighty like that! I don't even think he was taking me seriously!" Ginny snapped impatiently, glaring daggers at Theo again but Theo didn't seem to notice, now mingling with some Slytherin sixth year girls gathered around him.

"Ginny...He's a *Slytherin*...You're a *Gryffindor*. He's bound to annoy you one way or another...It's a fact of life. Get used to it. You couldn't have possibly believed he was prince charming now did you? Besides, perhaps he didn't really intend to offend us in any way...He was only being courteous." Hermione defended him, giving her friend a shrug.

Ginny just glared at her again, her eyes flashing with a hint in them that Hermione recognized as challenge and determination when the younger girl glared back at Theo with a growl on her face. "He's a bloody *jerk*. He's just as bad as the rest of them....Potter...Malfoy...Hell even Zabini turned out to be the same...Look what happened between him and Hannah! I should have known better than to trust a pair of pretty blue eyes! I'll show *him* who the 'cute little girl' is!" Ginny swore under her breath loud enough for Hermione to hear, causing her friend to turn worried eyes to her.

"What do you mean by that, Ginny?" She asked, her eyes widening as Ginny only gave a bitter smile at Theo's direction, her eyes narrowing carefully. "Exactly what I said...Even if it takes the entire term next year, I'll *show* him...Ugh...I can't believe I even thought he was bloody cute! He's a jerk! After all the trouble I went through just to make sure I look beautiful enough to catch his attention today, he—" Ginny stopped midsentence and instantly blushed, tearing her eyes away as Hermione smirked at her.

"Really now... I—" She never got to finish what she was about to say as the entrance doors finally opened again, causing them all to glance up and finally see Draco Malfoy walking back into the room with a bored looking AJ Potter at his arm, her green eyes surveying the glances aimed at them uninterestedly.

Draco ignored the gazes on them for a minute first, smirking at the first years outside who were peering in curiously at them before he snapped his fingers, gesturing to Crabbe and Goyle to shut and bolt the entrance doors.

As soon as the room had finally been sealed shut, Draco finally turned back to the Slytherins watching, smirking wider when he noticed that they had all raised their goblets up at him in the tradition of honoring the host of the party's venue, their own smirks plastered on their faces.

"What is it with Slytherins and their smirks?" Ginny whispered grumpily to Hermione as they made to do the same with their own goblets, looking slightly uncertain of what the silence was about until Harry walked over to join them, sensing their tension.

"Initiating Toast... Since it's Draco's house this year, we honor *him* and he has to present a short speech. Silly traditions really..." Harry whispered to them, merely chuckling and raising his goblet of wine up as well

Draco smiled and took the goblet of wine a house-elf offered him, raising it into the air before speaking. "Well then... We're all back here once again. Amusing how fast these parties keep coming really but as we know, it's the end of another interesting year of dominating

the school here at Hogwarts." He started, winking as the Slytherins chuckled their agreement.

AJ looked like she was about to walk away, not liking the attention but Draco easily wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, keeping his gaze lingering on everyone with a confident smirk. "Though we've had our problems this year...I'm happy to see that...*most*...have been resolved... I'm sure you'll all agree with me that this year has been very...*interesting*...to say the least." Draco glanced quickly at his best friend, who glared at him when the Slytherins laughed at the implied idea.

"So hopefully, after reacquainting ourselves with one another, we can successfully end this school year and move forward into a new adventure in the upcoming year as triumphant and as victorious as we Slytherins are always meant to be." Draco finished, finally nodding when the group answered by raising their goblets higher in affirmation.

Harry rolled his eyes at the formality of Draco's speech but raised his own goblet, failing to hear the mocking comments Hermione had been whispering to Ginny throughout the entire initiation, causing the two Gryffindors to laugh loudly and earn them some silencing glares from the darkly glaring Slytherins around them.

"Of course...I'd like to congratulate both Pansy and Lila for doing an excellent job of planning this event in a short span of time... You did a great job, girls." Draco said, giving the girls a wink. Pansy and Lila smiled smugly as the Slytherins once again gave them a brief raise of goblets to show their acknowledgement.

"And lastly...I'd like to welcome our mentor, Prof. Severus Snape, who has been generous enough to grace us with his presence today as our prevailing Head of House." Draco added, lifting his goblet up at Snape, who Hermione finally noticed standing next to the Head Girl, giving Draco an approving nod, looking slightly bored and impatient.

"I'll leave the band to fill the room now... Enjoy the rest of the year everyone." Draco concluded, finally nodding at the band behind them, causing the Slytherins to give brief cheers of appreciation when the group started to play a song.

AJ looked visibly relieved and snapped irritably when Draco finally dragged her to their seat beside Harry's at the top end of the table, swatting his arms away as he tried to pull her chair back for her. Draco sighed but turned to smirk at Harry and as he passed him, he gave his best friend a hard whack on the back, nearly causing Harry to spit out a whole mouthful of wine.

As soon as AJ sat down next to Hermione, the Gryffindor gave her a grin, raising an eyebrow. "You don't look like you're enjoying yourself, Ms. Potter..." She kidded weakly, watching as AJ shook her head at a house-elf's offered goblet of wine.

AJ snorted back, giving her a cold smirk that briefly reminded Hermione of the AJ she knew a year ago. "I could say the same for you, Granger..." She scoffed, rolling her eyes as the other boys finally began settling down their seats around them.

Harry plopped back down between Hermione and Ginny, who was suddenly looking nervous while Theodore sat down right across from her as well, instantly causing the redhead to tense up in obvious irritation.

Harry leaned over and placed a comforting kiss on Hermione's cheek, noticing her tension. "Hey...I'm sorry you have to go through this but I promise it gets better..." He whispered, his hand finding Hermione's and squeezing it under the table.

Hermione could only smile grimly, looking around tensely again as she realized her situation... Around her sat the most notorious Slytherins in the school and Harry expected her to believe that it gets better...

*It could only get worse...* Hermione thought as the empty plates in front of them finally began to fill up with food. *Better make sure it's not poisoned...* She thought suspiciously, raising an eyebrow before making to pick at her plate.

*She hasn't looked happy to be here all night...That's certainly something new for me.* Harry thought to himself, watching his girlfriend glumly pick at her food from the corner of his eyes, feeling

guilty all of a sudden because he knew that he had been placed in the exact situation, he would be acting the same way.

*I should have known it wouldn't be easy for our worlds to blend in...I just don't like seeing her like this though...* Harry thought, sighing before he promptly dropped his fork onto his plate with a loud clang, causing most of the people near them to glance up at him.

Harry only smirked at the attention and dropped his napkin onto the table, pushing his chair back and standing up with one hand offered to a surprised Hermione watching him. "Harry? What's wrong?" Hermione asked in concern, her eyebrows fusing together.

*Even in a situation like this...She would be worried about me...* Harry thought lovingly, marveling once again how much the Gryffindor seemed to touch a spot right inside of him. "Come on... There's a huge dance floor here and no one is using it yet...Let's dance, Granger." Harry asked, his smirk softening into a sincere smile.

Hermione's eyes sparkled with life for the first time that night at hearing his words, her face forming into a beautiful smile but she bit her lip and glanced at Ginny unsurely, causing her friend to roll her eyes and wave her off, giving her a teasing wink.

Draco didn't look all that amused at the couple but didn't say anything, merely snorting when Hermione took Harry's hand and let him guide her to the large, currently empty dance floor, the couple purposely ignoring the hideous glares and jibes Harry knew they were getting from his fellow Slytherins seated watching them.

Hermione couldn't have cared less however, allowing Harry to pull her once again into his familiar warmth and savoring the feel of his strong arms wrapped around her waist, her head automatically moving to rest on his chest. Harry gently took her hands and positioned them so that they were resting around his neck before he in turn leaned forward to drop a kiss onto her forehead.

Soon, all the people watching them had faded from view as their bodies began swaying softly to the music as one, both listening to the other's soft breathing and steady heartbeat as they slowly melted

away into their own private world, drowning out the loud whispers around them.

Hermione sighed and snuggled herself further into Harry's embrace, feeling all the well-missed emotions returning to her once again as she found herself back where she belonged—Harry's arms...The one place she had been denied of for weeks...

It felt good to be holding him once again...Feeling his body heat envelop her...His graceful fingers gently caressing her cheek...It gave her a feeling of coming home...Of being back where she belonged despite the harsh environment she knew they were in...Not even the Slytherins could affect her when Harry wrapped her in his embrace...

She knew he wouldn't hurt her again...After all they had gone through for one another, Hermione knew by now that Harry would protect her from even his friends if necessary...She didn't care about them at that moment... All she wanted was to stay here...To keep her arms wrapped tightly around him and never let him go...

To be honest with herself...She was terrified of what would happen if she did...She knew the Third Task was just a two nights away and she felt a strange sense of foreboding...She was afraid that once Harry set out into that maze...She might never have the chance to see him step out...

She felt her heart clench painfully at the thought and almost involuntarily, she tightened her arms around Harry some more, bringing their forms closer together for contact. *No...Harry will be fine...He had to be...*

She didn't want to think about that... She didn't want to think of the Third Task or how the school year was ending and they would be separated from each other for the summer... She could think about that some other time...Now...All she wanted was to focus on him... To feel him holding her...Kissing her...Loving her...

As if Harry could hear her silent thoughts, he slowly bent down and met her lips with his, once again rekindling a fiery passion in both of



them that Hermione had thought had feared would die out, causing her to weaken and clutch desperately at him for support.

She felt her lips burning with need as she pulled him closer, every inch of her skin screaming for contact with his while Harry only smirked into the kiss, using one hand to rub teasing circles on the back of Hermione's neck.

To her surprise, however, she nearly pulled back when she felt for the first time his tongue gently tracing her bottom lip, silently seeking entry until Hermione willingly opened her mouth to the sweet invasion, loving the way Harry seemed to claim every inch of her mouth dominantly as his own.

Hermione felt Harry's hands now tightening around her waist, pressing their bodies closer together until she was nearly crushed against lean form, both teens completely oblivious of the other couples already on the dance floor with them as Harry pulled away for much needed air.

It didn't last long as Hermione soon found those delicious lips pressing heated kisses onto her neck, his lips stopping just above her ear where he let his breath linger for a long moment before whispering, "I love you..."

The Gryffindor found that she could only melt at his words, suddenly blushing as she saw the other dancers now around them but Harry didn't seem to be caring, his face buried into the crook of her neck.

Pretty soon, she found those sweet lips caressing her sensitive skin again while Harry's talented fingers managed to neatly unbutton the first two buttons of her robes, successfully exposing a bit of creamy skin just above her chest. She held back a moan as his lips traveled down to kiss the exposed skin, deliberately ignoring the other dancers around them.

"You don't know how much I want you right now..." He murmured against her skin, his warm breath tickling her in the process and causing another ripple of desire to run through Hermione's spine as she dug her fingernails onto Harry's back to control herself, causing the Slytherin to hiss like a snake in response, obviously turned on.

"Don't do that..." He whispered seductively in parseltongue as Hermione felt a delightful wave of temptation overcome her again at hearing the spoken language...She had always thought that Harry sounded so terribly dangerous when he spoke Parseltongue but apparently, he also had the power to make it sound sexy...Everything about the damn boy was sexy...

She nearly gasped when Harry's kisses went down lower, unseen by the dancers around them, until he was tormenting her by kissing her *very* near her bra, a low growl of desperate want escaping the Slytherin's throat.

Just as she felt Harry's deceitful fingers attempting to unclasp another button of her robes, she clamped a hand over them, not at all wanting to do such an intimate exchange in the middle of a dance floor filled with other Slytherins around them.

"Harry...*Not here...*" She whispered, clasping the first two buttons of her robes again while trying not to smile at Harry's disappointed glare, his eyes moving all over her form with desire clearly written on his face. Wanting to take get his mind on something else, she leaned forward and held the handsome face in her hands, pressing her forehead against his.

"I love you...Harry...This year was purely magical...Almost like a dream...Because...Because I got the chance to fall in love with you. *Thank you* so much..." She whispered, kissing him on the lips before snuggling back against his chest as she closed her eyes.

Harry stiffened slightly and Hermione sensed a slight hesitation in his actions before he finally spoke. "I'm so sorry for everything I've put you through this year alone, Hermione... I'd change it all if I could but—" Harry stopped when Hermione pressed a finger to his lips, shaking her head at him with a smile.

"I *wouldn't*." Was all she said, caressing his cheek tenderly while Harry raised an eyebrow, looking adorably confused. "Wouldn't what?" He asked, causing the Gryffindor to smile and lean forward to kiss him deeply again before answering.

"I wouldn't change a thing...*Not a thing*, Harry...Nothing...Not the pain...The hurt...The deception...*Nothing*...It was all worth it if the ending was truly this way..." Hermione whispered to him, causing Harry's beautiful eyes to cloud over in love and desire that Hermione knew was reserved only for her.

"You've become a part of me, Harry... A part of my life... I would *never* change anything that's happened between us...And I will never forget this year..." Hermione told him, leaning over to place a kiss on the famous lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

Harry didn't say anything, merely holding her tenderly in his arms with a growing sense of realization he had never thought about until now... The Third task... Voldemort...He had to somehow make it out of there... He was terrified of what was going to happen but he couldn't let himself die... He *couldn't*... Not when he had so much to live for...

"Listen...I'm sorry if we haven't been spending time recently...I've been really busy—" Hermione rolled her eyes, cutting him off as she gave a sweet, melodious laugh at Harry's reattempt to explain himself.

"Harry, I understand...Don't worry about it... I've been busy myself so it's partly my fault too...I've been studying really hard for the exams next week...I want to make sure I get the Prefect position next year." Hermione admitted, causing Harry to give her a smirk, his eyes twinkling in laughter.

"Hermione, you and I both know that you've got that Prefect Badge in the bag alright? Who *else* would they choose to be the leader among your Gryffindor friends? Patil?" Harry asked in amusement, snorting as Hermione gave him a weak slap on the arm, laughing.

"Oh you... But seriously...You really think I'll get the position?" Hermione asked, biting her lip in nervousness while Harry grinned and leaned forward to give her a reassuring kiss, pulling their bodies closer together.

"Of course I'm sure...And coming from *me*, *that's* saying something you know. I'm *never* wrong." Harry said arrogantly, sneering but the

sneer vanished immediately from his face when Hermione gave an unladylike snort, causing him to narrow his eyes at her in annoyance.

"A bit cocky aren't we? You *were* wrong on one thing, Potter..." Hermione said smugly, feeling her chest lighter with happiness than it had been in days when she leaned forward and teasingly caressed the curve of her boyfriend's neck.

"And what might that be, Granger...?" He asked, his voice dropping to a husky growl as Hermione felt his arm tighten around her slim waist. She inwardly shuddered when she caught sight of the desire in his eyes but she held it back, leaning forward some more until her lips were lightly brushing against his ear.

"Gryffindors are not as innocent as they may seem..." She teased lightly, smiling when Harry groaned as she pulled away from him in an abrupt motion and made to walk back to the table. Harry glared at her before walking forward and yanking her into his arms again, his lips leaning down to ravish her neck.

"*Don't* start with me, Gryffindor...You should *never* tease a Slytherin... That'd be a very dangerous thing to do." He murmured as he turned her around to face him again, his green eyes glowing with both lust and mirth at the same time.

Hermione could only laugh in agreement as she let Harry hold her again, sighing when she felt his hand begin running gentle, soothing caresses through her silky mane of brown hair. "You never change do you, Harry?" She asked fondly, her voice soft as she raised a hand and stroked the silky cheek of the handsome boy who held her in his arms.

Harry's smirk instantly melted into the genuine, handsome smile she knew he reserved only for her alone as he raised his own hand and placed it over hers, guiding it to his lips and giving it a gentle kiss. "You've already changed me, Hermione... Changed me in much more ways than I would ever imagine possible..." He whispered, his fingers intertwining with hers.

Hermione smiled back, closing her eyes as she slowly leaned forward and snuggled her head onto Harry's lean chest, enjoying the

wonderful rhythm of his heartbeat as once again, she let him guide them into a gentle sway with the music. She couldn't help but feel herself melting in his arms as she felt his limbs soften until Harry was holding her with such a tenderness that Hermione wouldn't have been able to believe he was the other half of the Slytherin duo if she hadn't seen him for her own eyes.

She briefly remembered a time earlier that year when she had wished to be where she was at that very moment... Back on the Hogwarts Express...Right before Harry had stolen her first kiss...She had seen for the very first time...The tender, *loving* side of Harry Potter that no one knows about...

He had been with AJ at the time but Hermione softened as she saw the love reflected in those eyes... The pure, tender affection that seemed to radiate so easily from him despite the cold malice that resided there in contrast to it... It was when she had realized that she wanted to experience that love... She wanted to know him.

She wanted to get to know Harry—not just the boy-who-lived or one of the most sought after boys in Slytherin but she wanted to know the Harry that AJ knew... The little boy behind the cold façade that sought only for love and affection from the people around him...

Because deep down inside, she knew that that was what Harry truly was...A lost, lonely little boy who wants to replenish the love he had been deprived of when Voldemort had taken away his parents...It was the side of him he kept trying to bury deep inside whenever he resorted to such resentful means to earn attention from everyone else—whether negative or not...

In short...Harry was just a boy... And Hermione loved him for that simple fact... She would never leave him... From now on, she would always be there by his side...Supporting him... Holding him... Loving him... The way he needed to be loved... The way she had dreamed of doing ever since she had seen *him*...The real him...

If anything, she knew now that Harry's past relationships had ended so quickly because the girls he had been with hadn't been able to provide him the love and affection he inwardly searched for...She

was only happy that they had finally ended their differences and came to term with reality...And found each other...

"I'll always be here for you, Harry...Whenever you need me..." Hermione whispered softly into his chest, leaning in to Harry's touch when he caressed her soft cheek in response. "And *I'll* always protect you from anything...anyone...I promise...Nothing can separate us again, Hermione." Harry said firmly but Hermione shook her head with suppressed fear.

"No...Harry please don't make promises we both know you can't be sure of keeping... I've already gone through so much because of that... I just want you to give me *one* promise, Harry...Just *one* and that'll be enough for me." Hermione suddenly asked, her voice shaking when she pulled back and stared desperately into the eyes she had fallen in love with.

Harry was staring back at her with equal passion and desire, the green orbs fiery for a minute before he nodded his agreement. "Promise me that no matter what happens...No matter *who* or *what* may come between us in the future...Please, Harry...*Please* promise that you'll *try*...*Try* not to break my heart again. At least...*try*...A try is good enough for me, Harry... It's enough for me to know that you at least *tried* not to hurt me...Gave a little effort *not* to make me cry..." Hermione whispered, her eyes suddenly shining as she stared at him.

Harry felt his heart clench painfully at the softness of her voice, his arms wrapping tighter around her slender form as he pulled her against him, pushing her face back against his chest. "Hermione...I don't understand... Do you...Do you actually *believe* I would ever hurt you again...?" Harry asked softly, trying not to let her hear the hurt in his voice but he knew Hermione had felt it, her form going limp against him.

"Harry... I don't know...I really don't know but I have a feeling that sometime...In the future...You *will*...We both know how much it's possible...I know you, Harry...I know your tendencies...Your beliefs and sometimes, your recklessness... Somehow...I can sense that you're going to hurt me again." She admitted softly, dropping her eyes guiltily so Harry couldn't see her gaze.

His eyes clouded over at her words but he didn't pull away, if anything, only tightening his arms around her and leaning forward to kiss her forehead, a firm look in his eyes. "No, Hermione...You're *wrong*. I promise...I won't hurt you... I *won't*." He growled firmly, his voice low in his throat but Hermione couldn't find an appropriate response, merely nodding silently against him.

*I hope so too Harry... But not all promises are easily kept. Not all are meant to be taken seriously.* She thought but frowning, she shook the thought away and closed her eyes again, wanting, more than anything, to believe Harry's words. "Forget it...Forget I mentioned it, Harry. It's not important...I'm probably just being paranoid." Hermione lied, giving him a smile as she raised her head and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Harry asked quietly but Hermione didn't push the subject, instantly smiling and abruptly moving the subject. "You'll never guess what happened today though..." She said, giving him a mysterious wink to perk his interest.

It worked, apparently, as Harry raised an eyebrow in curiosity, urging her to continue. Hermione shot him a grin. "I...I mean, *we*—Ginny and I—spent some time with your sister today...She was the one who took us to Hogsmeade to find proper robes..." She told him, her eyes widening when Harry didn't look surprised.

Instead, he smiled back, nodding. "Yeah... Makes sense to me... AJ's always wanted a girl best friend to do stuff like that with since she doesn't get to with all us guys around her." Harry commented, chuckling at the bewildered look on Hermione's face.

"So... It doesn't surprise you that your twin sister...Who so happened to be my bitter rival for three years by the way, just helped me go shopping?" Hermione asked, an eyebrow raising delicately as Harry only shook his head, smirking. "I told you it was possible...I'm right about everything." Harry reminded her arrogantly, causing her to playfully swat him on the head.

"That's *not* the point, Harry...I was just surprised I guess... AJ's...Well... She wasn't the girl I thought she was... Seems I misjudged her...Push aside the annoying bitch that pops up every

now and then, she's actually *human*." Hermione said, sounding as though she didn't believe her own words but Harry nodded, a smile on his face as he looked at his sister.

Currently, she was trying to engage a bored Ginny in a conversation so the younger girl wouldn't feel left out but it looked as the Gryffindor was too busy glaring daggers at Theo's slightly amused but confused gaze at her across the table. Finally, AJ sighed and shrugged, watching sullenly as Lana McGregor started flirting with Draco beside her, who was surprisingly flirting back, his well-known charming smile in place.

AJ had rolled her eyes and looked up, catching Harry's gaze across the room. A slight understanding passed between them as Harry smiled at her, causing AJ to return the smile gratefully at him, her irritated gaze softening for a lingering moment before dropping back moodily to her plate, purposely ignoring Draco beside her.

*Trying to make AJ jealous...* Harry guessed right away, knowing the blonde Slytherin enough to know the tactics he was pulling to gain the attention he wanted from someone else.

"We actually talked...I mean, *really* talked this time... And I think we've finally come to an understanding between us... To be honest, she's a special girl, Harry." Hermione told him, watching as Harry blinked and turned back to gaze at her, his eyes expressing his agreement.

"Yes...She is... Just like you..." He whispered, leaning forward and capturing her lips again in a deep, passionate kiss in which Hermione found their tongues battling each other again. Naturally, Harry won and he claimed her mouth once more, his hands going to caress the back of Hermione's neck.

"You don't know how much that means to me, Hermione...I love you..." Harry murmured into her ear before gently claiming her lips again, causing Hermione's head to start spinning dizzily as she fought to keep her balance.

When Harry had pulled back, Hermione was surprised to see Harry pull back slightly to remove the serpent pendant he wore around his



neck. As soon as he had though, he instantly pulled the beautiful Gryffindor to him again, holding the glittering silver pendant in his hands.

"Here...I want you to have this from now on, Hermione." Harry said softly as he began clasp the pendant around Hermione's neck, causing the Gryffindor to jolt back in surprise and lightly push his hands away, shaking her head.

"Harry, no, of course I can't take that!" Hermione protested weakly but at seeing those green eyes staring imploringly at her, she sighed and tried to explain herself. "Harry, that's your favorite pendant...You told me yourself...I couldn't possibly take such a thing away from you. Besides, you already gave me enough." Hermione reasoned gently, gesturing to the Lion pendant she already had around her neck.

Harry shook his head forcefully and pulled her close to clasp the pendant around her neck again, his eyes unsurprisingly stubborn as he did. "I know that, Hermione but I want you to have it...Just wear it for me, please? I want to see it around your neck and I want every other guy in school to see it...To let them know that who you belong to...That you're *my* girl. I have no doubt *everyone* would recognize that pendant." He said gently but firmly, giving her another kiss on the lips to muffle her protest.

"But Harry... You've never let anybody else wear this pendant since first year! Are you really sure you want to give it to me? I don't understand..." Hermione argued weakly again but she knew she was fighting a losing battle when Harry's eyes met hers again, knowing no one was never able to deny those beautiful emeralds anything.

"Wear it for me, Hermione... Think of it as a sign of my promise..." Harry insisted but Hermione cut him off, trying to argue again. "Harry, I told you, forget about what I said...It's not important, I—"

"*Hermione*...It's a symbol...If...I do as you say I will...If I ever break your heart again in the future...If I ever hurt you again the way I used to in the past... Then you're allowed to take it off... Then you can return the pendant to me as a sign that I broke your trust...That I had broken my promise and I hurt you..." Harry explained, cupping

Hermione's cheek as she clasped the serpent pendant tightly in her hand.

"That way...I'll never forget my promise...And when I never forget it than I can never break it right...? I can never hurt you... But...If...And *only* 'if' I do...Then feel free to throw it right back at my face...Cause then I wouldn't deserve to have you wear my necklace..." Harry finished, looking deep into Hermione's eyes for a reaction.

*I hope you're right, Harry...* Was all Hermione could think, finally closing her eyes and sighing before she opened them and forced out a smile, nodding in forced optimism as she gave him a peck on the cheek. "Then I guess that means I'll be wearing it a long time, huh?" She kidded lightly, feeling a lump in her throat as Harry's nervous face lit up into a smile.

"Yes...Yes, you will..."

*Why do I even bother to come here...?* AJ asked herself darkly, stabbing at her food before she sighed and purposely dropped the fork onto her plate with a loud clatter, looking around again.

Beside her, she couldn't help but feel a surge of anger when she heard Lana giggling at something Draco was saying, causing the both of them to erupt in a light round of laughter that made AJ's stomach churn.

She was never one to be familiar with jealousy before but she felt it now...In every single cell in her body as she continued to watch Lana purposely ignore her own date and coyly trail a finger down Draco's biceps from across the table, nearly causing AJ to hurl her fork at the girl in anger.

The worst part of it was the fact that Draco didn't seem to be pushing the girl away, responding by smirking flirtatiously at her as though he didn't remember that she was even beside him. AJ knew she probably shouldn't let it bother her too much but the fact that Lana had been Draco's ex-girlfriend last year didn't appear to make things better. If AJ didn't know better, she would have guessed that the two had been flirting the entire time they were having lunch but as usual, like her twin brother, she wouldn't let her emotions show.

Blaise however, was doing his own sulking right across from her as he down his fifth full glass of wine, barely even registering the fact that his date was not bothering to talk to him as he looked up and motioned for a house-elf to pour him another glass.

AJ winced as she heard Lana giggle again, this time leaning closer as Draco flashed his gorgeous smile and made to explain some of the basic principles of a Quidditch match—something AJ was perfectly sure Lana cared absolutely nothing about but was only using to talk to the popular Slytherin to her advantage. Lana wasn't exactly the sporty type of girl to find the topic of Quidditch interesting.

But even AJ couldn't ignore them as Draco took one of Lana's manicured hands into his and gave the back of her palm a charming kiss, nearly causing AJ to hurl her entire plate at him and scream at him until her throat hurt.

"This is exactly why I wanted a guy like Ron in the first place...And I had to end up with the one guy I *despised*." AJ muttered bitterly under her breath so Draco wouldn't hear, mentally cursing her own stupid heart for falling in love with such a jerk like Draco but she didn't say anything as she quietly excused herself and walked away from the table, furiously holding back her anger.

Once again she was back to her reasoning... She wasn't stupid...Harry and Draco were two of the most notorious playboys in school and though she loved her brother dearly, she wouldn't have wanted to date someone like *him* given the chance... So why in the hell did she love Draco...? Why not Ron or even Blaise or someone like Cedric even? Why Draco...? Why did it have to be *him*?

But deep down, she knew the answer....*You can't choose the person you fall in love with...No matter what you do...It wasn't a decision you could make for yourself.* A voice inside her said, causing AJ to sigh and walk off to an isolated corner of the room to herself. Silently, she walked over to the balcony outside and rested against the railing, looking silently up at the scenery of Hogsmeade before her.

She had thought that incident with Ron the night Draco had seen them had been the last of their fights for this year but it seems by dating someone like him, she wasn't in for an easy love life...She

knew there would be more... Much more to come across their path... And Draco, having a past of playing around, might not be able to resist all of it...Why was it she was always so bloody cursed when it came to life?

She loved Draco and yet, she knew she was going to get hurt with him...Why did things have to change all of a sudden...? Why couldn't they have stayed the way they were when it was easy to tell the blonde Slytherin her mind and fight against him? Why couldn't she have just stayed hating him like she did their first three years?

She shook the thoughts away and glanced back at her view of the village... Marveling how fast everything between them changed this year alone... The shrieking shack... The fountain... The private path where...She bit her lip at the memory. Where she and Draco had kissed... The mountains where Harry had told her their godfather was currently hiding, keeping a closer watch on them...She idly wondered what Sirius would do if he found out about this party...

"AJ?"

AJ jumped at the voice and whirled around in surprise to see Draco standing there, watching her with a worried gaze, his silver eyes filled with a strange sparkle of affection and concern that AJ rarely saw in the cold, piercing orbs.

"What are you doing here? Why did you leave me alone in there?" He asked softly, walking over to stand beside her, his eyes moving to rest on the view as well. AJ couldn't help but give a bitter scoff and move away from him, her eyes narrowing.

"I'm surprised you finally noticed me, Malfoy. From what it looked like in there, you were having a perfectly good time with McGregor that I didn't think you'd mind if I left you two alone. You didn't seem to be paying any attention to me the entire night anyway, I figured it wouldn't matter to you if I left." She spat out, her eyes moving to glare quietly at the ground.

To her surprise, Draco turned to face her and chuckled, his eyes lighting up with warmth at her words. "Finally... I didn't think you'd take the bait at all..." He replied softly, slowly raising a hand and

turning AJ's face until those shocked, enraged green eyes were resting on him.

"What?!" She asked, her eyes narrowing as Draco smiled again, a slightly smug look forming on his handsome features. "I just wanted a way to catch your attention somehow...You were sulking from the moment we entered the party that I thought you didn't want to be my date...I was only trying to get you to pay more attention to me." Draco admitted, looking slightly sheepish.

AJ's eyes flashed at him, her features contorting with indignation. "Oh yeah and really creative way to do it too, Malfoy... Flirting with your ex-girlfriend hardly seems like the perfect way to get my attention." AJ snapped angrily, shoving his hand away from her and trying to walk away but Draco grabbed her arm, spinning around to face him.

"You didn't give me any choice, you idiot. You kept sulking and glaring at me the entire night that I thought you were thinking about how once again I am nothing like your '*perfect guy*' and how a '*jerk*' like me would only take pleasure in hurting you or about how '*stupid*' you are for falling for the '*villain*' in the fairytale!" Draco snapped back, his eyes filling with hurt and betrayal.

AJ's eyes widened at the accurate accusation, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment. "I wasn't thinking that at all, Malfoy! You have no *fucking* right to say that to me after *you've* had your eye on Ms. Pretty Blonde back there the entire night when you were supposed to be *my* date—"

"I was only playing around! I wasn't serious, if anything, the only reason I did that was because I wanted you to notice me!" He blurted out, his grip tightening painfully around her arm.

"Well don't play around with me, Malfoy! I'm not some stupid brainless girl you could manipulate however you want you know!" AJ snapped back, trying to slap his hand away but Draco only glared at her, fires of anger hidden in his eyes.

"Don't change the fucking subject!" Draco sneered, his eyes flashing dangerously the way it did the night he had seen her with Ron and it made AJ step back slightly from him in fear but otherwise return the

icy glare. "I'm not! The subject in mind here is that you're nothing but and will *always* be an insensitive, *heartless* jerk who thinks of no one but himself! Damn you, Draco! *Damn* you!" She shouted angrily at him, trying to wrestle her arm out of his grasp.

"Is that what I am now? Come on then, tell me I'm wrong. Tell me that you *haven't* been thinking of those things I just said...Tell me you came out here to get some bloody fresh air instead of muse to yourself how *Weasley* would have made a better boyfriend than I ever would be." Draco hissed angrily, his eyes narrowing into accusing slits.

AJ tried not to let her guilt show as she shook her head at him. "That's *ridiculous*! I haven't been—"

"Oh no? Don't lie to me, AJ! Don't you fucking lie to me!" Draco exploded, causing the girl to jump in surprise at the hostility in his voice. AJ was looking guiltily at the floor now as she pondered Draco's words again, knowing that she had utterly mistaken him but Draco didn't seem to be finished. "Draco, I didn't—"

"That's what you'll always think of me, isn't it? I'm always the bad guy to you...I'm always the bloody fiend who stole your idea of a happy ending in your goddamn fairy-tale fantasies because I wasn't the 'prince charming' you were hoping for. Is that it? How low do you really think of me, AJ? How low...How *disgusting* am I to you?" Draco asked in a hurt whisper, his eyes glinting as the hand he had around AJ's loosened weakly.

AJ's jaw dropped open, her eyes widening in shock. "Draco, it's not like that at all! I never thought of you that way! I just thought that you were really interested in that girl and I got carried away, I—"

"Well everything just seems to be *my* fault isn't it, AJ? It's always *my* fault we fight, it's always *my* fault we both get hurt because *I'm* the horrible one...I'm the playboy, I'm always the scoundrel to you and if you keep thinking every single bloody day that if you could honestly choose for yourself who to love, you'd pick Weasley over me any day...Hell you'd pick *anyone* over me any day." Draco said in a trembling voice, the corner of his eyes burning but he turned away in utter humiliation at how he was easily showing his emotions.

AJ's heart completely shattered at the sight of them as she tried to move forward and wrap her arms around him but Draco flinched away, pushing her back from him. "Admit it, AJ...You don't *want* to love me...You never did... And the only reason you're with me is because you say your heart is obligating you to do so..." Draco spoke softly, now not tearing his gaze away from her even as his vision began blurring.

"That's not true, Draco, It's—"

"Don't lie! Do you truly believe that I'm nothing more than a piece of worthless trash that would break your heart the first chance I get? Am I *that* low? Am I honestly that unlovable?" Draco asked again, his voice dropping to a whisper barely loud enough to be heard but AJ was crying openly now, trying to meet his gaze.

"Draco, I'm sorry, I never meant to think that way, I just—"

"I'm a human too, AJ... I may be '*Draco Malfoy*' but I'm not some cold-blooded snake... Even...'the bad guy' can be hurt... Even 'the monster' can love sincerely... Is it hard to trust my intentions when I say I truly care about you? That I would do my best to make you happy...? What more do you want from me...?" Draco demanded sarcastically, flinching away from her touch again.

"Draco, *please*, I don't want anything, I'm—"

"If you want to continue that belief about me, AJ, that's *fine*... I can't tell you how to feel about me...I can't tell you to...*want* me the way you want Weasley...I'll never be good enough for you, I know that...But please...Please, grant me the smallest dignity in believing that I'm not just out to hurt you like some bloody game...Because I'm *not*...I'm not like *you*..." He whispered lifelessly, his eyes dropping to the ground as AJ felt the harshness of his words pierce her deep inside.

"It's not my fault I fell in love with you...Please...Just stop shoving it back in my face." Draco finally finished quietly, using a single hand to angrily dash the single tear that managed to escape his eye as he caught her tearful gaze.

"Draco...I'm sorry..." AJ sobbed out, not having the face to hold his gaze as she wrapped her arms protectively around herself, somehow feeling vulnerable in his gaze but Draco didn't say anything, merely watching her.

"Now...If you don't mind, *Ms. Perfect*, I believe I've missed enough of the party already." Draco said coldly, his eyes regarding her for a long moment before he dropped his gaze and turned to head back into the party but AJ saw this and finally rushed after him, crying softly as she wrapped her arms around his waist from behind and clung onto him tightly, refusing to let him go.

"Draco, I'm sorry...I'm...I'm j-just sorry...I'm so sorry...Please...I'm sorry...I'm sorry...Draco...Please..." AJ pleaded desperately, her cries making it difficult for her to get the words out as she kept crying them out over and over again like a hopeless broken record, obviously not knowing what else there was to say.

Draco stopped instantly, feeling AJ's frail form desperately keeping him from leaving as the girl buried her face into his neck, muffling her anguished sobs against him. *No...Don't give in...Don't you break your pride any more than it is already...You're a Malfoy...You're...* Draco bit his lip, feeling his anger melt away at the heartbreaking sounds as he let her cry against him. *Don't... Walk away just walk away...* He tried to tell himself but to his frustration, his body seemed to be doing the opposite as he sighed heavily before he gave in and placed his hands over the arms she had around his waist.

Then, closing his eyes at his own weak resolve, he eased himself out of the stuttering girl's arms and turned around to let a sobbing AJ bury her head onto his chest, his arms going to wrap around her waist and pull her form against him in comfort.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, Draco...I'm sorry..." Was all she could say over and over again against him as Draco closed his eyes, not answering but rubbing her trembling back as AJ continued to cry softly against him, her harsh whimpers piercing the silence and her arms wrapped tightly around him as though she was afraid Draco would leave her if she let him go



Draco finally opened his eyes and sighed again, casting away the voice of his pride completely now as he leaned forward and gave the sobbing girl a tender kiss on the forehead, his hand moving to stroke her cheek. "Hey...Don't...Don't cry...Don't cry anymore...I'm not angry anymore...Don't cry..." He soothed gently, tightening his arms as AJ felt her tears flow more rapidly in response.

Draco gave her a weak laugh, trying to lighten up the mood as he caressed her cheek again, tucking back a strand of hair that had escaped her now messed-up hairstyle behind her ear. "C-come on...Stop crying...I'm not m-mad at you...Don't cry anymore...I'm sorry I flirted with Lana all right...? Just stop crying, baby...Please..." He tried again, leaning over to rest his chin on top of her mane of black hair.

"I—I'm sorry...Draco...I'm so sorry...Please...I'm sorry I thought that way...I'm sorry...I don't deserve you, I—" AJ stuttered, trying her best to get the words out as Draco pulled slightly away and took out a handkerchief, wiping the tears away from AJ's wet face. More tears started to fill the emeralds at the sweet action but Draco didn't react, only wiping them away again before AJ buried her face into his chest once more, her sobs now subsiding as she closed her sore eyes. "I—I'm sorry...I—"

"*Shh...*I know, baby..." Draco shushed her gently, interrupting her words again as he answered by pulling away slightly and tilting her chin up so that she was looking back into his eyes, allowing her to see such love and tenderness she saw in his gaze that it was almost hard to believe it was Draco.

AJ bit her lip nervously, praying that Draco wouldn't reject her but Draco only raised one side of his lips into a weak grin, his hand moving to wipe at AJ's cheek. "Your mascara's all runny now, you ugly idiot." He teased feebly, finally managing to earn an equally weak choke of laughter as AJ raised a hand to her face to wipe it away.

Draco didn't say anything for a moment, only looking at her as AJ dropped her eyes, not knowing what else to say until Draco lifted her chin up towards him again, causing their two unsure gazes to meet.

AJ looked deep into his eyes, fearfully searching for a sign of how much he hated her while Draco shook his head and wiped at AJ's leaking eyes with his thumb again, a small smile adorning his face. "I'm not mad at you, AJ..." He told her, causing the girl to tremble in response but otherwise close her eyes before answering.

"I l—love you so much, D—Draco...You'll *always* b—be my prince charming...Even without the f—fairy-tale fantasy..."

Draco found that for the first time in his life, he couldn't muster up a damn word to say as AJ stared back helplessly at him, obviously fearing his rejection or reaction. AJ bit her lip, her eyes as wide as saucers now as Draco could only stare back, his eyes unreadable as her words repeated over and over in her head.

"D—Draco...?"

AJ never finished as the blonde Slytherin launched himself at her and pressed his lips passionately against hers, his strong arms going to pull AJ's body against his own until their forms were pressed together like two pieces of a puzzle.

AJ seemed confused and made to pull back but Draco wouldn't have any of it, using one hand to crawl up her neck and pull her face closer to his, feeling the girl begin to melt under his ministrations. She didn't protest when Draco reached up and unclasped the clip holding her now messy hair back, letting the silky strands fall down loosely as he ran his fingers over it repeatedly.

Then, dropping the clip carelessly back onto the ground, he scooped her up into his arms and positioned her so that she was sitting against the balcony railing, causing AJ to stiffen in slight fear of falling off the edge but Draco murmured reassuringly within their intertwined lips and she relaxed, allowing the Slytherin to readjust them again so that AJ's legs were wrapped around his waist.

She whimpered when Draco's lips left hers but she soon stopped when he leaned over to work on her neck, slowly kissing his way down the curve of her neck to her shoulder, pushing aside the dress robe to reveal the pale, creamy skin hidden underneath.

Without hesitation, he bit down onto the delectable flesh, causing AJ to cry out softly in pain and tighten her arms around him, wincing as she felt him kiss the flow of blood away before looking back up and meeting her eyes with the silent question for permission to go slightly further.

AJ just nodded and pulled him to her, nuzzling his neck and imitating his earlier actions as she hesitantly pressed her lips to the pale skin and bit down hard, causing Draco to yelp in surprise and AJ to chuckle against him as she kissed the wound dry, pulling away to smirk at him.

Draco just smiled back, rubbing his sore neck in an endearing motion before attacking her neck again, this time his hands moving to slip under her robe and travel sensually along one smooth, shapely leg, finally jolting AJ back to her senses as she instantly made to stop him.

"I think that's far enough, Draco."

"Harry, what exactly are you so tense about?" Hermione demanded as she noted Harry's stiff stance and nervous features, his green eyes going to dart around the room as more and more, the Slytherins gathered around the center of the dance floor for his speech about the TriWizard Tournament.

"Are you nervous about your speech? Come on, Harry...You *know* them, they—" Harry shook his head at Hermione's assumption, giving her soft hand a gentle squeeze. "It's not *that*...Nothing...I guess I just want to get it over and done with, that's all..." He replied rather hastily, turning away in embarrassment.

Hermione raised an eyebrow but didn't question him further about it as she looked around again, her eyes widening when she saw Ginny walk over to them with Theo, both obviously having come from a dance as well. She couldn't help but smile as she noticed the glare Ginny was sending her dance partner as once before she pointedly moved away and sauntered over to where Harry and Hermione stood among the other Slytherins.

Without hesitation, she took the other arm Harry offered her before sending another vicious look at Theo, who had raised his eyebrow in

sincere confusion, obviously unaware of why the Gryffindor was pissed at him. "What happened? You dance with Theo huh?" Hermione asked curiously in a whisper as Harry continued to converse with the others around them.

Ginny only snorted in response, her eyes narrowing further when Antoinette reattached herself to Theo's arm and dragged him away from where he was still staring questioningly at Ginny to her other seventh year friends.

"Oh yeah...We danced all right... He asked me to dance shortly after Harry asked you but how would *you* feel if the guy you're supposedly dancing with was only teaching me how to behave myself in a formal gathering as this one? Apparently he noticed my glaring and thought me as rude and juvenile." Ginny hissed back, her eyes flashing as Hermione looked at her in surprise.

"He said that? Really? *Theo* said that directly to you?" She asked again, not daring to believe it but Ginny sighed and shrugged, the angry look never leaving her face. "Well not *directly* I suppose but he *implied* it so he could have very well called me a *child* to my face! And he's only a year older than me, he doesn't have the right!" She snapped, glaring his way again.

"Ginny I think you're only misunderstanding his intentions...Don't you think you're being too sensitive about this whole... "child" thing? I mean surely he doesn't mean it that way, you're only *understanding* him like that because you're insecure about your age...About what AJ told you about him." Hermione tried to reason but all she got in return was a glare that could have sent *Harry* running.

"*Sensitive? Sensitive?!* Hermione, *you* try growing up as the youngest among *six* brothers who absolutely regard like you some helpless little child who can't take care of yourself and *then*, let's talk! I get enough of that 'young lady' rubbish all the time from my parents, my brothers and *now*, that Slytherin jerk and I certainly don't need it from *you*. Alright?" Ginny said coldly, causing Hermione to pale in realization.

"Ginny, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply anything with what I said. I just—"

"Forget it, Hermione. I don't want to talk about it anymore. Let's just listen to what Harry has to say and then let's get ourselves out of here. I wouldn't want *Mr. Mature* to tell me I'm way past my bed time." Ginny said sarcastically, rolling her eyes as Hermione noticed Theo looking at her again.

"God, he only met me when—? *Yesterday*? AJ was right when she said he can act so goddamn superior all the time...I think I'd prefer a rude, wild jerk to a *charming* but self-important pig like him any day." Ginny whispered, causing Hermione to smile in spite of herself and secretly hide the look of amusement in her eyes, well aware of the fact that this was the first time Ginny had ranted so much about a single guy alone.

*Not even Michael or her past crush on Harry had this effect on her...* Hermione thought but she forgot all about that when she saw Draco and AJ finally reenter the room and head for their direction. To her curiosity, AJ's once neatly styled hair was now loose against her shoulders, her jeweled clip held uselessly in her hand.

Her eyes looked a bit red but other than that, she was glowing with a smile for the first time ever since they entered the party and Hermione noticed her hand held tightly by Draco at his side. Draco however kept a calm mask on his face but she saw the unusual sparkle in his cold silver eyes when he looked at AJ.

Harry looked up and gestured for them to join him, finally nodding as the Slytherins ushered him to begin his speech. Draco smirked but nodded and easily strode over to them, his eyebrow raised in anticipation. AJ leaned over and gave her brother a kiss on the cheek before he nodded and finally stepped up onto the stage where the band had stopped playing.

The Slytherins had amused smirks on their faces but otherwise were watching respectfully as Harry cast a "Sonus" charm on himself before turning back to his house. "I'll make this one quick since I'm pretty sure none of you want to listen to me telling you how much of a wonderfully skilled and good-looking champion I am the entire night." Harry started, causing the group to scoff in response and in Draco's case, shout out an unflattering comeback in response.

Harry only grinned smugly and gave the group a saucy wink, causing Hermione to roll her eyes but otherwise, smile and watch as he continued on with his speech. "I'd just like to personally thank you all for dedicating this party for my chance at winning the TriWizard tournament this coming Monday...It's an absolute honor for me to be fighting as Slytherin's champion and I know that I won't be letting you down." He started, nodding when some Slytherins hooted their agreement.

"I appreciate your continual support for me in all this, of course...You've all be a great help and I'd like to extend my gratitude to Prof. Snape as well, who has been giving me preparation lessons these past weeks." Harry added, raising his goblet to his Head of House, who easily returned the gesture with a nod.

"Pansy...Lila...I really appreciate you doing this for me, girls and I have to say that you both look gorgeous tonight." He quipped, turning to give both girls a charming smile and flirtatious wink, causing Hermione to stiffen slightly when Pansy and Lila both returned the action. For a minute there, she thought she had seen the Harry she knew resurface around his friends.

"You both did a great job with this celebration..." Harry told them, nodding as Pansy and Lila both had smug smiles on their faces, raising their goblets up to show their appreciation.

"Also to my best mate—Drac, I appreciate the support as well even though you're a bloody annoying ferret most of the time." Harry said, smirking as Draco gave him a fierce middle finger response and the other Slytherin boys laughed their agreement.

"And of course...AJ...My twin sister... I love you, you ugly brat... I always will..." Harry said in a softer tone of voice after that, looking at his twin sister with a smile with AJ easily returned, an unspoken promise of love and affection seen exchanged through their identical green eyes.

"...To my beautiful girlfriend... Ever the true Gryffindor...The first to ever show me what a real relationship means..." Harry spoke again, this time not minding when the Slytherins only forced a clap in

response and the girls glared very icily at Hermione, who smiled at Harry's brave comment.

"I hope you *do* realize that he has a new girlfriend to thank every year...You're no exception." A cold voice said behind her, causing her to whirl around and see Pansy smiling sweetly at her, a venomous look in her eyes. Ginny stiffened beside her but Hermione shook her head, remembering AJ's words the other day and giving the girl a cool smile.

"Oh I'm aware of that fact, Parkinson...Why? Disappointed in the fact that tradition is going to change?" Hermione answered in the same sweet tone, causing Ginny to hide a smile and even AJ to smirk at the look of fury on Pansy's face.

"You're not going to last...You may have him now but what makes you so sure.." She stopped when she caught sight of the pendant Hermione had around her neck, her carefully made-up eyes wide with disbelief.

"I don't believe it...You conniving bitch! How did you manage to get him to give you that necklace?!" Pansy hissed in an angry tone, her hands clenched tightly into fists but Hermione ignored her, pulling Ginny forward until they were closer to the stage away from the irate girl to listen to the rest of Harry's speech.

"Also...To those who...er...made those interesting badges..." Harry said, smirking once again as he gestured to the 'Slytherin Champion' badges some of the younger Slytherins still had pinned onto their robes. They grinned in response and gave him a nod as well.

"To the guys as well—Thanks for helping me during those hard training sessions..." Harry grinned, raising his goblet as Draco, Blaise, Theo and even Crabbe and Goyle raised theirs to show their acknowledgement. Harry nodded before he finally turned to the Slytherins, showing a smile that displayed rows of perfect white teeth.

"And thanks to *everyone* for their support...I only have one last thing to say before I shut up completely and let you all go back to your drinking and your...*scoring*..." He winked at the Slytherin guys who rolled their eyes in annoyance but chuckled nevertheless.

Harry cleared his throat, pausing for a couple of silent moments before he finally allowed his Potter smirk to appear on his handsome features as he said his final words. "Hufflepuff...Beauxbatons...*Durmstrang* are going *down*." The Slytherins all broke into an agreeing applause after that, cheering as Harry raised his goblet again before taking a quick drink.

"Well...Interesting as Potter's speech was, I'm up for a dance..." Draco suddenly drawled next to her, pulling AJ close to his body as the Slytherins began to move onto the dance floor with the upbeat music once again. AJ smiled and allowed him to wrap his arms around her just as Harry climbed back down the stage and walked up to Ginny, a handsome smirk on his face.

"I believe my other date owes me a dance...Weasley?" He asked, looking at Hermione briefly to see if she didn't mind but Hermione shook her head and smiled, waving them off and watched as Ginny grinned and instantly took Harry's hand, dragging the handsome Slytherin to the dance floor next to Blaise and Lana.

Hermione's eyes watched in amusement as AJ allowed Malfoy to pull her to him so that her back was against his chest, their bodies moving together as one with the soft music before she finally blinked and looked up to see a group of older Slytherin girls walk up to her, their gazes haughty and arrogant.

"So...You're Harry's girlfriend huh? He seems to be really keen on you..." A girl in expensive robes of black silk drawled, sipping her wine before turning to give her a sneer. Hermione met her gaze evenly, only nodding her agreement. "Yes I am...Does that bother you?" She asked coldly as the girls around her only laughed in response.

"Why would it? I give you a couple of months and Harry's going to be back to his old ways...Why would somebody change over a short span of time?" Another girl pointed out, rolling her eyes.

Hermione rolled her eyes, feeling an intense wave of anger bubbling inside her. "I'm not interested in your pathetic ways of trying to break us up again, alright? Our relationship is *none* of your business so



back off." She replied coolly, trying to walk off but another stunningly pretty brunette blocked her path, looking ticked off.

"*Not* our business? Can't you see what we're trying to do here? You're obviously *all* wrong for him, sweetheart..." She said sarcastically, glaring her down with cold blue eyes. "Yeah...You can't give him what he really needs... Don't you see what you're doing? You're tying him down...*Holding* him down...Someone like you isn't right for him." The blonde beside her said, smirking at her.

Hermione felt a pang at the words but she refused to let them see her being affected, keeping her chin up as she answered. "Oh? And what exactly is it you think Harry needs?" She asked, raising her eyebrow.

The girls looked at one another and chuckled before the blonde girl suddenly stepped forward and looked Hermione right in the eye, her hand going to grasp the serpent pendant Hermione had around her neck. Hermione stiffened and watched as the girl held it up so that Hermione could see it clearly in her vision.

"Harry needs someone like *him*...Some strong, fierce...*ruthless*...Someone who knows what she wants and how to get it...Someone who'd be an equal partner by his side who matches up to his standards... Someone who can take charge and knows how to command his power into her as well...Someone who can fight alongside him..." The blonde girl said carefully, looking her up and down in distaste before dropping the pendant hastily.

Hermione glared at her, clearly not liking the words coming out of her mouth. "You're wrong...Harry needs someone to *love* him...To take care of him...He's not the perfect leader you all think he is...He's more human than any of you all put together!" Hermione raged, her brown eyes flashing but the girls burst into a light, hearty laughter, their wine glasses lightly shaking in their hands as they laughed.

"Fiona's right...Are you sure we're talking about *the* same Harry Potter here? You don't know him the way *we* do...We've been his housemates *and* friends for four years now...*you* were his enemy until *this* year...We know how dark his personality really is...Why do you think he and Draco are the Slytherin duo?" The brunette smiled sweetly, loving the doubt in Hermione's eyes.

*This is the same thing they've been doing to Hannah...* A voice spoke in her head but she barely understood what it meant, only hating the smug smiles on the girls' faces around her.

"You'll see soon, *Hermione*...You'll see that dark personality we're talking about surface soon enough...It's still in him, you know...Hidden now, probably but it's still there...And it's only a matter of time before he brings it back up...We know him...That's why we chose him to be our leader...Well...*That* and among other...*Personal* things..." Fiona drawled, her eyes sparkling mysteriously.

Hermione was about to tell them all off once and for all when she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her waist as Harry joined them, looking oblivious to the glares the other girls were sending the Gryffindor. "Hey...I'm glad to see you getting along with some of my friends here..." Harry commented, giving Hermione a kiss on the cheek just as the Slytherins all transformed their smirks into smiles at his arrival.

Looking around she saw that Ginny was now dancing with Blaise, the redheaded Gryffindor casting occasional fearful looks at the drunken Slytherins boys that were now beginning to make a scene around them.

"Hermione, I'd like to introduce you to some of the most gorgeous and wonderful gals I know...Well aside from you of course." He said, kissing her again and causing Hermione to relax slightly but keep a suspicious glare on the girls around them.

"Harry, you're too much..." The blonde girl cooed, showing her perfect white teeth as Harry only laughed and smiled back, unaware of Hermione's tense, wary figure as she tried to control her anger.

"Hermione, this is Fiona Jameson by the way..." Harry said, pointing to the blonde girl who gave Hermione a sickeningly sweet smile which Hermione returned. She was immensely annoyed however when she noticed that Harry didn't seem to be aware of the animosity between them as he gestured over to the other brunette next to Fiona who had been blocking Hermione's path. "And *this* is Paige Richards...Our *next* head girl." Harry smirked sexily as he winked at her, causing Paige to fake a blush.

"Aw...Harry, stop it...You're making me embarrassed..." She drawled, causing the girls *and* Harry to laugh lightly among themselves but Hermione could only force a laugh, tightening her grip on Harry's arm to indicate to him that she wanted to get away.

Fortunately, Harry seemed to understand as he nodded and said a brief good bye to the disappointed group before he pulled Hermione out to the same balcony where Draco and AJ had been a few minutes ago, checking behind his back for something before he turned to face the Gryffindor's glare.

"What was *that?!'*" She snapped, shoving him away as Harry's eyebrows met together in confusion at her anger, an adorably innocent look that didn't seem to belong on his face.

"What was *what?* Hermione, what are you going on about now—"

"*That!* You were flirting with all those girls in there, exchanging bloody looks with those bimbos!" Hermione yelled, her beautiful features scrunching up into a jealous scowl. Harry's eyes widened in surprise and mild insult. "Whoa...Hey, hey...Those *bimbos* happen to be my friends, Hermione and I was *not* flirting with anyone...Come on..." He soothed, wrapping his arms around her again to pull her back against him.

Hermione sighed and tried to control her jealousy as her weak state could only allow herself to fall back against him, closing her eyes as she tried to ease the fury away. "I know I may seem flirtatious at times but that doesn't mean anything, Hermione...It's just in my nature...You still doubt me until now?" Harry asked softly, watching as Hermione shook her head and sighed, opening her eyes to give him a smile.

"No.../m sorry, Harry...I guess I just got carried away...It's just...Those girls...They said..." She stopped and blinked up at Harry's curious eyes. "Said what...?" He asked, his tone demanding and harsh but Hermione flinched and decided against telling him, knowing it would only cause up problems again.

"*Nothing*. Forget it...So...Um...Anyway...What's your big surprise for me?" She asked, trying to change the topic as Harry suddenly smiled and pulled her closer, leaning down to whisper something in her ear.

"You remember that one time you told me during our first date that...Well, the most romantic thing a guy could ever do to you would be to—"

"Sing my favorite song?" Hermione finished for him, raising an eyebrow and smiling when Harry surprisingly blushed but nodded, a nervous look forming on his handsome face.

Hermione couldn't help but feel a sudden rush of excitement in her chest as Harry looked at her again and smirked, his eyes twinkling mischievously. "Right... Well...Come on..." He urged, pulling her back inside and allowing Hermione to notice that the large ballroom had now dimmed and was sparkling with glitters, the entire dance floor filled with swaying figures of couples pressed together as they moved to the soft melody.

Some Slytherins, Hermione noticed, appeared to be drunk and were doing wild actions in the corners of the room while others, much to her horror, were beginning to make out in such extreme ways in the far dark corners of the room or even on the dark dance floor.

*Slytherins*...She thought, shaking her head as Harry gently took her hand and led her to the dance floor, passing by certain dancers who turned to give them a quick glance before returning to their private worlds.

Ginny winked at her when Hermione passed her dancing with Theo once again, who apparently had left his date somewhere amidst the other drunk Slytherins by the tables. Both seemed to be locked in a serious discussion and Hermione smiled to see the irritation in her friend's eyes yet again.

Harry looked up and finally signaled to the pianist on stage, causing Hermione to look up in confusion when the wizard nodded and gave him a thumbs up. With that, Harry pulled Hermione to him and enveloped her in his arms, melding along with the other dancers just as the music ended abruptly and another softer, *familiar* melody

began playing, causing the nervous beating of Hermione's heart to stop altogether.

*Oh Merlin...* She thought, nearly forgetting to breathe as sure enough, the familiar notes of her favorite song began to kick in through the large ballroom, the softly played piano notes sending a shiver down Hermione's already trembling body.

Then, with a smile, Harry leaned forward until his lips were brushing against Hermione's ear, closing his own eyes as the band played the wordless melody of the song he had grown to love.

*"Whenever sang my songs...On the stage...On my own..."* He sang softly into her ear, causing the Gryffindor to instantly melt into his arms as she listened to his tender, sultry voice sing the words she had fallen in love with.

"Harry, you romantic prat..." She managed to say, her eyes filling with tears as a choked-up laugh escaped her lips, resting her head against his shoulder and closing her eyes.

*"Whenever said my words...Wishing they...would be heard..."* He sang again, his tenor voice sounding like pure heaven in Hermione's ears as she felt her breathing hitch in her throat. *Oh Merlin...He did all this for me...He remembered my words...And did this for me...* Hermione thought, feeling her heart bursting at the thought as she tried to keep her tears in check.

*"I saw you smiling at me...Was it real...Or just my fantasy...You'd always be there in the corner...Of this tiny...little bar..."* Harry easily intoned, his voice easily blending in with the playing instrumental melody, unheard of by the other dancers but echoing again and again in Hermione's ears and heart.

*"My last night here for you...Same old songs...Just once more...My last night here with you...Maybe yes...Maybe no..."* She felt a tear slip down her cheek at the words, knowing just the possibility behind them but she forced herself not to think about it, tightening her arms around Harry as he kissed her softly on the cheek.

*"I kind of liked it your way...How you shyly placed your eyes on me..."* He hummed, kissing her gently on the lips again before Hermione gave him a teary smile and sang the last line of the chorus with him, *"Oh did you...Ever know...That I had mine...On you?"*

*"Darling so there you are...With that look on your face..."* Hermione smiled as his words began lulling into her into a beautiful dream, the dance floor around them fading as she found that she could only see and hear Harry...His voice like that of an angel resonating over and over again in her head.

Sighing, she closed her eyes and leaned back against him, feeling the Slytherin caress her neck as he sang almost as soft as that of a parent singing a lullaby. *"As if you're never hurt...As if you're never down...Shall I be the one for you...? Who pinches you softly...But sure..."*

*"If frown is shown then...I will know that you are no dreamer..."* Harry smiled as he let the music play on its own for a while, his arms never one loosening around Hermione's weak figure as she kept her face buried into his chest.

For that moment, Hermione couldn't even believe that she had considered what those girls had told her...Because at that moment...She would have willingly gone through all of it again...All the hurt...All the pain...All the fights she and Harry had experienced if it meant that she could always have moments like these with him...

In his arms...Listening to his beautiful voice sing out the words she loved to hear...It didn't matter to her anymore that Harry was the leader of these horrible students around them...She couldn't care about his past or how horrible the dark side of him inside was...She was blind to it all because she loved how he held her...Loved how he made her feel...Loved *him*...

And if all that sacrifice...All that patience, understanding and acceptance on her part guaranteed that she would be forever by his side, in his arms...Dancing with him... Listening to his voice...Listening to his heartbeat...Forever savoring the purely wonderful moments and memories such as this one...Then she would gladly give it all up...

No matter who he was or what he did...Harry would always be the same to her...He would always be the sweet, romantic boy she knew when he was in her arms...When he was kissing her...Holding her...Loving her... *That was Harry... That was her Harry...Not the one those other girls knew...*

*And only my Harry would ever do something like this...* She thought again with a weak, teary laugh against him as Harry stroked her hair in response before pulling away for a brief moment to conjure up another white rose with his wand, lifting it up so she could see it clearly. With a smile, he traced her lips with the rose, his eyes glistening in desire.

*"So let me come to you...Close as I...Wanna be...Close enough for me..."* Harry let the rose trail down from where it caressed her lips to her rapidly pounding heart, resting it there before raising his gaze to meet hers.

*"...To feel your heart...beating fast...And stay there as I whisper..."* He pulled her against him again, leaning in so his lips could brush against her ear. *"How I loved...Your peaceful eyes on me...Oh did you...Ever know...That I had mine...On you...?"* He sang softly, letting the rose tickle her ear as Hermione shivered, biting her lip before she smiled and allowed herself to sing the last lines of the song.

*"Darling so share with me...Your love if you have enough...The tears that you're holding back..."* She pulled back and caressed his cheeks, her eyes coming to rest on the emeralds that had stolen her heart. *"Or pain if that's what it is...How can I let you know...? I'm more than the dress...And the voice..."* She sang, smiling and taking the rose from his hand as Harry watched her with an adoring look in his eyes.

*"Just reach for me then...You will know... that you are not dreaming..."* She finished, taking the rose and intertwining it in her hair again the way she knew Harry loved, causing the Slytherin's eyes to soften as he admired the way the flower seemed to reflect the pureness he knew only Hermione could ever possess.

He pulled her to him again, dancing and holding her tenderly to the last few instrumental notes of the song until he looked up and pointed

his wand at the ceiling just before the song ended, immediately causing a shower of white rose petals to cascade upon the room.

"What the bloody fuck...?!" Were the loud reactions of most of the Slytherins but Harry only chuckled and wrapped his arms around Hermione again, loving the way her body fit so perfectly against his own.

"I love you, Harry..." She whispered, her voice barely heard over the first notes of Eyes on Me replaying once again on the piano at Harry's signal but Harry heard it somehow, his arms tightening to squeeze her in understanding.

"I love *you*..." He answered, knowing Hermione needed to hear the words almost as much as he needed to remind her. Hermione stayed silent for a minute, savoring the words before she looked up and allowed Harry to see the freely falling tears on her cheeks.

"Hermione—"

"Harry...Promise me...You won't do anything foolish in that maze...*Promise me*..." She whispered again, her voice sounding weak and defeated but strangely enough, stubborn as she looked deep into his eyes.

"Hermione, I—"

"No...You don't need to say anything else, Harry...Just promise me again...*Please*..." She pleaded, her voice cracking as another tear escaped her eyes. Harry sighed and caught the tear with his thumb, wiping it away before he leaned over and kissed the off the one on rolling down her cheek.

"I promise...Everything is going to be *fine*, Hermione...Nothing bad is going to happen to me..." Harry assured her though even he didn't sound like he believed his words.

"I don't care...Just...Come back to me...Harry...I want you in my arms...Safe after that bloody task is over..." Hermione said stubbornly, pulling him to her again and firmly burying her face into his neck.



*'Nothing bad is going to happen...'* His words echoed repeatedly in her head, sounding like a stranger... *If only it was that easy to believe him...*

"Nothing bad is going to happen...I promise..."

**A/N:** Is *that* right, Harry? I certainly hope so...ugh, that *sucks*! Just to clear up a few things that may be confusing you—I'm sure you're all wondering why the Slytherins are so supportive of Harry...**THAT** will be explained in future chapters of Order of the Phoenix but they **DO** have their reasons... Yes, their parents are supporters of Voldemort but the Slytherins—*Harry's friends*—support *him*. *Not* Dumbledore...*Him*—As in Harry alone--and in the fifth book, we'll be seeing how strong those loyalties lie and where they're based on. ;) And so ends our last fluffy scene in GoF...:( **Next: The third Task** as well finally—a confrontation with Voldemort...(shudders at the name) And the last few revelations...3 more chapters I think...Can you sense the finality of it all...? Hope you all liked it! **PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO REVIEW! mwah!**

**A/N:**

Hey everyone! It's me again. The author you all want to murder for disappearing for four years without a word.

First thing's first, I would like to apologize to all my readers and friends here in for disappearing the way I did. To make matters simple, I've been going through some changes in my life back then. I'm back now. That's all that matters.

For those who have remained ever faithful supporters of the AAA series (I love you guys! ), I have both good news and bad news.

The bad news is...Well...Unfortunately, due to lost computer files and my unbelievably long absence from fanfiction writing, I will put this particular story on hold. At least until I reacquaint myself with the plot and edit some of my earlier chapters to suit my current writing style. Just to clarify, I am NOT abandoning this story—merely taking the time to go over it again and familiarize myself with the characters, their developments, and major parts of the plot I originally intended.

The good news is—while you're all waiting for me to update Goblet of Fire—I've decided to upload a new story instead. I've upload the first two chapters of An Alternate Adventure: Order of the Phoenix where you can all catch up with everyone for their fifth year.

I'm sorry about GoF but I find myself currently lost with that story as my current ideas are revolving around the plot of Order of the Phoenix. I found it was much easier to write a sequel which adheres to my new writing style rather than try to fit in with my old one. In any case, please check the new story out if you're interested. I've uploaded the first two chapters.

Seeing as this story might be deleted if I upload a chapter that is purely an author's notice...This is a teaser chapter of AAA: OOtP. You can find the rest of the story from from profile page. Enjoy!

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**Teaser Chapter - Order of the Phoenix**

Green eyes looked up expectantly at the sky, watching the small gray figure descended upon the dusty window. Frail, eager hands carefully reached for the nearby handle and opened the window just as a breeze of fresh morning air entered the room.

She breathed deeply, closing her eyes and waited as a fine eagle owl landed silently on the windowsill, giving a soft hoot to call her attention. Smiling softly, she reached over to stroke it, causing the owl to hoot again— this time affectionately— as it seemed to recognize her.

“Good morning.”

The girl in question turned around in slight surprise and came face to face with a tall, handsome young man behind her. Blinking, she looked up at the same emerald green eyes looking at her with the same questioning look.

“Harry. You’re up.” She whispered softly, looking around the room to make sure none of their relatives could hear them. She gave her twin brother a small smile and walked over to him, a familiar owl perched on her arm.

Harry nodded, giving her his crooked smile as he watched her unhook the small piece of parchment attached to the owl’s leg. “It was about time that boyfriend of yours sent us a letter. What did he say?” He asked curiously.

AJ grinned and sat down on the edge of the bed that more than filled the small but spacious room. A rather large mirror stood in front of her, allowing her to see both her and her brother’s reflection, their raven black hair reflecting the light that shown from the window.

“Actually... Harry, it’s from Draco’s father. It’s about the surprise party we’re all planning for Draco on his birthday. He says he’ll have us picked up tomorrow before lunch by some of his house elves. We’ll be traveling to their summer rest house by floo powder.” She answered him, scanning the letter briefly.

Harry looked worried. “Floo powder? Won’t that be dangerous? I mean... Considering that Volde—”

“Yes, er. He assures us that the Malfoys have their own private floo network specifically made for use of any member of their family. It’s completely safe and untrackable. All of the other guests will be using it.” AJ rushed out, trembling slightly at Harry’s near mention of the name.

“Oh. Alright. Can’t have Voldemort killing off more people now can we?” Harry drawled darkly, his eyes blackening dangerously as a scene that had happened not so long ago flashed in his mind.

AJ held her breath tautly, biting her lip as she felt the familiar sting in the corners of her eyes. She knew what Harry was talking about... And though she hadn’t witnessed the same amount of horror her brother had seen that night, she knew Harry had never walked out of that graveyard the same person.

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Hermione didn’t know why she was particularly searching so hard for the answers to this but somehow, she knew that once she found out, she would be able to explain a lot about Harry’s current behavior. Or why the dark-haired Slytherin was so powerful.

She didn’t have time to dwell on it, however, as *Ferio*, AJ’s eagle owl, nipped her finger lightly, hooting softly to snap her out of her thoughts. Hermione blinked for a moment. “Oh.” She managed as she reached into her dresser and gave the handsome owl a small treat, which the animal happily accepted.

He allowed Hermione to stroke his feathers for a brief period of time before he hooted again in farewell and flew off into the night sky, leaving Hermione to her thoughts once more.

Before she could sink into another monologue with herself however, she shook her head and massaged her temples, knowing full well she wouldn’t get any answers from drowning herself in her own questions.

Instead, she did as AJ told her to and reached for the pink receiver beside the bed, looking for the parchment with Harry’s phone number. After punching in the digits into the muggle device, she lay back onto her soft covers, sighing contentedly.

It wasn't long that someone on the other line picked up, allowing her to hear a loud, scruffy voice. "Yeah, Whaddya want?" Came the unwelcome rasp, causing Hermione to wince at the loudness of the voice as she had to hold the phone slightly away from her ear.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley... Uhm... May I speak with Harry Potter, please?" Hermione asked politely as she twisted a strand of her wavy brown hair around her finger, making sure she sounded as normal as possible.

"Who is this? Are you one of them?? One of them freaks?! Cause if you are, let me tell you, I'm not afraid of you! Don't you dare come near me or any of my family!" Vernon bellowed into the phone, his voice shaking slightly.

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to control her irritation, trying again. "No, Mr. Dursley... I'm not one of *them*... I'm simply... er... from the police station. I was hoping to talk to your nephew... it seems he has a criminal case." Hermione answered smartly, wincing from the outright lie.

"Oh... Well... In that case..." Hermione smirked as she heard the man conversing excitedly with his wife on the other end. After about a minute of muffled conversation, he spoke into the phone again. This time, more rationally.

"Very well. Hold on for just a second." He told her and soon after Hermione heard his heavy footsteps and his callous voice shouting upstairs for Harry.

"Quit shouting, Vernon." Came the cold reply as she heard Harry's lighter footsteps descending down the flight of stairs.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she heard Harry's voice telling his Uncle off before he picked up the phone, speaking softly but firmly into the receiver.

"I have no criminal record in this neighborhood but yes, how may I help you?" His voice sounded grim though Hermione could sense the irritation he felt at the accusation.

“Does the criminal record of not answering your girlfriend’s letters fast enough count?” Hermione answered teasingly, laughing when she heard Harry’s breathing hitch in his throat.

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“Parkinson and Perrine are here??” She asked in surprise, groaning out loud. “I would have thought their loyalties were rather questionable. I wonder why Lucius invited them.” She said out loud, watching them from over Blaise’s shoulder as they danced.

Blaise rolled his eyes. “AJ, just because you find their presence completely annoying doesn’t mean they’re followers of You-Know-Who. They adore Harry and Draco with a passion. I just don’t see them going against them.” He pointed out, snorting in derision.

“I suppose... Oh but Blaise they’re such snobby, arrogant gits! I can’t stand them!” AJ complained, watching as the two girls were followed by Theodore Nott and a couple of moments after, a dark-haired Ravenclaw seventh year AJ only knew as Nathaniel Townsend. He caught her eye and smiled briefly, causing AJ to blush at having been caught staring and look away.

“Hey, I’m not the one who used to have late night gossip sessions with them. And another thing, we’re *Slytherins*, AJ. It’s *natural* for us to be snobby arrogant gits! I don’t understand what the big deal is.” Blaise replied in slight irritation, looking pointedly at her.

“Well yeah... But... Well... I’m just saying I’m surprised. That’s all. By the way, where are Crabbe and Goyle? Wouldn’t be Draco’s birthday without his cronies, wouldn’t it?” She asked, looking confused.

Blaise shifted uncomfortably, choosing instead not to answer her question but to twirl her around once more.

“Blaise?” AJ asked, looking at him.

“Yeah... Well.. They were marked questionable so Lucius didn’t have them invited.” He answered, looking uncertain.

"You're kidding me... Crabbe and Goyle? Those two idiots would actually side with Voldemort?" AJ asked, angry and disbelieving at the same time.

Blaise winced slightly at the mention of the name but nodded, looking over AJ's shoulder. "Well... It isn't sure yet... But it's better safe than sorry, right?" He added, laughing nervously.

"Why don't we save this small talk for later, duchess? Your haughty boyfriend is here." He pointed out, raising an eyebrow in amusement when AJ spun around instantly, her eyes darting around to search for the familiar blonde Slytherin.

She didn't see him however but instead saw Lucius Malfoy, who had walked into the room with a mischievous smirk on his face, pressing a finger to his lips.

"Draco's outside, waiting for me to call him in. I'll count to three with my fingers... When I do, I'll call him in while you all yell surprise." Lucius explained to them, beckoning for them all to move closer to the entrance.

Harry grinned and had by then, stopped dancing with Caitlin, walking over to stand a couple of yards directly in front of the door where Draco would be entering. He wanted to see the look on his best friend's face after this.

Blaise and AJ immediately walked up next to him, AJ's heart pounding rapidly in her chest.

"One....Two...."

"Father, what's this all about? Why in Merlin's name would I have ever needed a tutor—" Draco Malfoy stopped midsentence just as he entered the large ballroom, his silver eyes going wide with surprise and confusion as he took in the scene in front of him.

"Three!"

**"SURPRISE!"**

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“I wasn’t flirting, Draco. You *know* I’m yours. Body *and* soul.” She told him, smiling when she saw the Slytherin’s eyes cloud over in desire.

“Yes. You are.” He murmured, leaning over to brush his lips very fleetingly on hers, causing her breath to hitch in her throat. She sighed contentedly as he pulled away and snuggled into his chest, the music around them slowing into a romantic melody.

Draco let his hands travel up and down her back, the other hand gently playing with the silky strands of her hair. “Mmmm. You’re beautiful... You know that?” He spoke softly, leaning over to drop a kiss onto her forehead.

AJ didn’t respond, closing her eyes as she savored the feeling of their bodies swaying gently with the beat of the music, her head resting on his chest.

“I missed you.” Draco told her, moving one hand to caress a soft cheek before he pulled back slightly so he could look into her eyes. “I missed these lips.” He continued, flashing a sexy smirk before he traced them with his finger, his eyes following the path he traced out.

AJ closed her eyes as Draco slowly bent to meet her lips in a searing kiss, his hands snaking around her waist to pull her against him. She felt it again. The familiar burning in her chest... The fire that had erupted all over her body.

Only Draco could make her feel this way— could make her heart beat so fast in a single instant with the slightest touch or word. Only Draco could make her feel like her body and her soul were one... And that everywhere he touched her, she felt his own soul reaching out to hers. Imploring her. Wanting her.

She lost all sense of thought altogether when she felt his tongue teasing her lips gently, humbly seeking entrance which she instantly obliged, causing them both to moan softly. Soon, she found herself teasing his tongue with her own, although a bit uncertainly, unsure of what to do.



Draco smiled into the kiss and pulled away slowly, watching her as she blinked her eyes open, looking at him in confusion.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to stop there, duchess.” He told her, his cheeks tinged with pink and looking slightly out of breath.

AJ looked forlorn, her eyes dropping to the floor. “Is it me...? I... I’ve never done this before.” She started but Draco shook his head, putting a finger to her lips.

“No, AJ. I meant...” Draco laughed softly, trying to explain. “I want to do more... I’m just afraid I won’t be able to control myself if I went any further with you.” He explained, his eyes laden with passion as he stared into her eyes.

AJ blushed but understood, nodding. Before she lost her nerve, however, she stepped up to him and put her arms around his neck, pulling him in towards her lips. Draco’s eyes widened in surprise but he didn’t protest when AJ caught his lips again, this time initiating the kiss herself, exploring his mouth timidly with her own tongue.

Draco melted at the innocence of the action, gently caressing her face when she pulled away, looking slightly scared but sure of what she was about to do.

“I’m yours, Draco.” She told him softly, her eyes focused intently on his own silver orbs.

Draco blinked in confusion.

“I know, AJ. What—”

“No. I mean—” She looked around uncertainly, unsure of what to tell him.

“C-can we go somewhere more private? I... I-I have to talk to you about something.” She told him, looking intently at him.

Draco nodded, not fully understanding. Looking at Blaise and slightly signaling he was going to go upstairs, the other boy nodded, returning to converse with his friends. Before anyone else could

interrupt them, Draco quickly led AJ out of the ballroom into the quiet foyer, where the girl looked around nervously.

“Umm... Can we maybe talk in your room? Where it's more private?” She asked him, biting her lip. Draco raised another curious eyebrow but obliged, taking her hand and guiding her up the stairs to the second floor. After leading her through a mess of hallways, they came upon Draco's large bedroom at the end of the hall.

Closing one of the large double doors, he finally sat her down on the large four-poster bed, raising his eyebrows. “Alright. What's up, AJ? Something wrong?” Draco asked in concern, kneeling in front of her.

AJ shook her head but didn't answer him, still blushing as she looked around the enormous room. The room was decorated in a peaceful shade of green and white with beautiful carpets and carefully painted walls.

A large window was in the center of the room, adorned with beautiful pale green curtains while a large full-length mirror stood in the corner of the room, gleaming from where she sat.

*This is it. No turning back now.* She told herself, finally turning to face him.

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Harry was soon interrupted by his thoughts however when he heard a soft chuckle in front of him, causing him to look up into the smiling face of his ex-girlfriend Cho Chang who had obviously seated herself across the table.

“Sickle for your thoughts, Harry?” She asked lightly, raising a curious eyebrow just before Harry helped himself to another drink, blatantly ignoring her.

“Galleon for your leave, Chang?” He countered blandly, downing the shot in one gulp before turning to face her with a guarded sneer, unsure of how to go about talking to the girlfriend of the guy everyone accused him of killing.

Cho bit her lip uncertainly, looking embarrassed.

"I-I'm not here to blame you or ask you anything about Cedric's...death... Harry. I really just wanted to talk to a familiar face in the crowd... There's not a lot of people I really know here." She admitted, her bright eyes dropping to the floor.

Harry raised an eyebrow but didn't respond, still unsure of what to say.

"Alright...How are you holding up then, Chang? Still think I'm the biggest asshole to grace this planet?" He asked bluntly, causing the girl to give a short laugh, hastily shaking her head.

"N-no... Harry. Actually...I think it's wrong for all those people to blame you for what happened. If anything, I wanted to thank you...You brought Cedric's body back... That was very brave of you." She spoke softly, blushing in embarrassment.

Harry kept his eyes trained on her, inspecting her face suspiciously for any signs of malice. Strangely, he found none.

"How kind of you. Tell me, *Cho*, what is this really about? Why are you here? You haven't talked to me since I dumped you in third year." He replied harshly, narrowing his eyes dangerously at her as she began fiddling with her hands.

"H-Harry...Please. I—I... I mean you no form of malice whatsoever. I just wanted to be with someone tonight... I've been so terrified lately. Especially after what happened to Cedric. I've been feeling so vulnerable...so alone..." She began blurting out, struggling to choose her words carefully.

Harry didn't respond, his emerald green eyes lifeless as he watched her talk over his newly filled glass of vodka.

"W-well... You're powerful, Harry. You're so strong...And you're not afraid of the Dark Lord at all...Somehow I just feel so safe being in the same room with you." Cho spoke softly, placing her pale hand gently above Harry's arm and squeezing slightly, causing the Slytherin to stiffen in alarm.

"Excuse me...?"

He didn't pull back but his eyes dared her to explain further, warning her to choose her words carefully lest she suffer his wrath of anger.

"Please...If you'll dance with me just once, I'll—"

"I believe that's not possible." Came Harry's cold reply as he stood up and shrugged her hand off his arm, downing the rest of his drink in one gulp before walking brusquely to the far corner of the room towards his friends.

"Harry, please! Wait!"

He heard Cho struggling to chase after him from behind but he didn't look back, his green eyes search the room hastily for any sign of Draco.

*Damn it.*

"Harry!"

Gritting his teeth, he turned around, his robes swishing dramatically behind him as he gave the Ravenclaw a patient leer, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Forgive me for being rude, Chang but have you *no* friends here tonight that you must *insist* on following me for the rest of the party?" He asked her, smirking when the girl reddened in humiliation.

"No, Harry. Please, don't think I'm sending the wrong impression or anything. But please...Can you at least give me one dance?" She asked him gently, her eyes pleading in a way so similar to Hermione that Harry sighed and gave in, allowing her to pull him onto the dance floor.

*One dance couldn't hurt...It's not like I'm cheating on Hermione or anything. It'll be fine.* He thought to himself as he held the other girl in his arms, tensing slightly when Cho closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his shoulder.

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"You wanted to do this the muggle way, Potter? Climb up the trellis to get in. I can't let you in through the front door, my parents will kill me for bringing home a guy." She whispered, looking around nervously.

At that, Harry couldn't help but smirk roguishly, raising a single eyebrow. "Then I reckon they shouldn't know about some of the other things you've been doing, Miss Granger." He drawled, causing Hermione to shoot him a death glare.

"Hush. Now, hurry up. Climb already before someone sees you!" She hissed at him, gesturing him towards the trellis.

"How romantic." Harry replied sarcastically before he clambered over towards the wall, hoisting a strong leg up onto the unsteady trellis for support.

"Are you *sure* this thing will hold?" He asked nervously, testing his weight against the brittle wood.

"It's not like you weigh a hundred pounds, Potter. Now hurry up!" Hermione urged, her heart beating nervously as she kept a steady look on the front door in case her parents caught them.

"Hey, I resent that. You think I'm just a scrawny git, don't you?" He huffed indignantly, hoisting another leg up easily towards a higher step, keeping a firm hold on the railings for support.

Hermione was about to retort when she heard her mom's voice behind her, followed by a knock on her bedroom door.

"Hermione, dear? Are you in there? Who are you talking to?"

Hermione gasped and rushed over towards the door, locking it before her mother could walk in and notice the Slytherin ambling up towards her window.

"I'm fine, Mom! I-I was just...practicing some spells for school. I wasn't talking to anyone!" She called back nervously, ignoring Harry's pointed snickers from under her window.

“Are you sure...? It sounded like you were talking in there.” Her mother replied suspiciously, knocking on the door once more.

“I’m perfectly sure, Mom. You and Dad go on back downstairs.” She reassured her, laughing nervously. There was a slight pause before she heard her mother step away from her door.

“Alright then, dear. Just making sure.” She replied kindly before Hermione soon heard the sound of her footsteps fading, causing her to breath a sigh of relief.

She was about to turn back to the window to help Harry up and she jumped back, muffling a gasp of surprise as she came face to face with the fluffy face of her stuffed Gryffindor lion, which Harry had held up against his face in front of her.

“Grawr?” He teased lightly, a seductive smirk on his face as he slowly lowered the stuffed toy, allowing Hermione to see the desire evident in his features. She swallowed nervously, grabbing the lion from his grasp and setting it back down onto the bed.

“That was fast. I didn’t hear you climb in.” She said hastily, managing a laugh as she sat back down on the edge of her neatly made bed, looking up at Harry in silence.

She felt another insane urge to laugh as she pondered their current situation. If anybody had told her one year ago that *Harry Potter*, of all people, would be in her room, she would have sent that person straight to St. Mungo’s. She found the situation all to amusing.

Harry wasn’t listening to her however as he looked around her room in keen interest, his bright green eyes inspecting its feminine neatness. He blinked as he took in the pink and white shades and unscrupulous organization, smirking when he saw the rather massive shelf of books in the corner.

“So...This is your room...” He wondered out loud, walking over to a nearby trunk and opening it invasively, causing Hermione to exclaim as he came upon her undergarments.

Harry grinned as Hermione shoved him away from the chest, hastily closing it and locking with a huge muggle padlock.

“Pervert!” She hissed angrily at him, making to slap him lightly but Harry caught her hand and used it to pull her against him, wrapping both of his own around her waist.

“You’re right. I’m not interested in *those*, Granger. I’m more interested in the ones you have on.” He purred into her ear, sending shivers down Hermione’s spine as he pressed their bodies together, his hand pushing her bangs away to reveal her glowing brown eyes.

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<b>A/N:</b>	Intrigued	yet?
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